Seasons of the Palm

Perumal Murugan

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Translated from the Tamil by

V. Geetha

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For Kandan known as Mondi, who died
when a stone fell on his chest

Dust

One

When Shortie and his herd of goats enter the vast field outlying the village, it is still dawn. The sun sits snug behind Tiruchengode hill, reluctant to climb even that modest height. The earth is silent under a veil of thin light. Excited and hungry, the goats set up a thick rustle, as they scramble noisily into the harvested plots that lie scattered across the field. With a sigh, the field stirs awake to the sound of goat feet.

The field is not entirely flat. Part of it rises into a moderately high plateau, broken into plots, and home to the hardy kambu. The grain has been harvested a few days ago and the plateau looks forlorn. Earlier, the ground, moist with crop, breathed a rich green life. That time is over. It is brown and sorrowing now. A season for mourning.

The marks of the harvest can still be seen. Dried kambu stalks lie all around. Thin rusted blades baring their rough, sharp edges which can cut deep into naked feet. Tangled and knotted bean creepers fall indolently over each other, dull, dusty and bereft. The furrows are thick with dried leaves, thistles and the fallen silk of the kambu. Smashed castor plants still stand in some of the plots, their stalks stiff and erect.

Everywhere, the furrows are like ancient faces, wrinkled and lined with sticks and broken plant stems. In a few weeks, though, the lines will blur and disappear, stamped out of shape by the rushing feet of marauding goats and their human keepers. Then the wind blows hard and stirs the earth into dry dust. The earth grows warmer and goats are happy to roam the length and breadth of the field, their noses close to the earth. The earth is indulgent too—it yields to the

goats' hungry mouths and lets them nibble at clumps of grass and fallen leaves.

Shortie bends his herdsman's stick into a bow, and flings it high into the air. Catching the rising wind, it sails past a large-sized plot of land and boomerangs, a sharp thud of green. The goats are startled and retreat into each other. Ears alertly raised, they stand poised for a moment, as if they hoped to catch the culprit sound. But only for an instant. Almost at once, their heads are to the ground as they shuffle along the furrowed field. Their white foreheads are visible even from afar, smeared with the bright red decorative mark from several days ago—the auspicious mark of the harvest festival. They look freshly washed, a rare glow surrounds their almost milk-white skin.

The ground is damp, January dew clings to the grass and leaves. The goats find it difficult to move fast, their feet skid and slide. Dewdrops wet their nostrils, and they shake their heads this way and that, till their noses feel dry. They walk slowly through the field. Gamboling kids try to keep pace with older goats, but are soon lost in a confusion of goat limbs. Yet they keep at it, and run with the herd, eager to get to the pasture across and beyond the plots. Some of the older goats lag behind, gurgling and spitting, but not for long. Soon they draw up with the rest.

Shortie stands on the edge of the mud bank that runs along the field and circles the harvested plots.

"Aiy! Nedumbi! Back! Off!"

He shouts, as a straggler breaks away from the rest and runs towards a lone palm. Halted by his sharp tone, Nedumbi stops. Shortie is not sure if the goat will listen or run on. She stares at him as if she means to heed him, but turns and runs towards the palm. This time, there is a sureness to her gallop.

"Nedumbi! Nedumbi!"

Shortie looks at the big disobedient she-goat in dismay. He grits his teeth and scrambles down the sloping mud bank and into the field. Nedumbi is at the foot of the palm. Her nose picks out the shavings of palm kernel that lie on the ground in white heaps. Kandamoopan, the toddy-tapper, has probably sliced the kernel with a knife earlier. He must have come at the break of dawn. Fresh and wet, the shavings sit like patches of snot. Nedumbi snaps them up, but does not eat them at once. She carefully shakes away the mud that sticks to the shavings and then begins to chew on them. Seeing Nedumbi feed, the other goats begin to run towards the palm.

Shortie looks up at the palm tree. It is a male tree. Four clay pots cluster at the top, collecting toddy. The tree is almost bare, except for a swathe of fresh, green fronds ringed by ageing brown leaves—a scraggly, thin, baby crow, with no down yet on its back. Kandamoopan is heartless when it comes to male trees. He chops at the fronds, till the tree is almost barren. But with female trees, he is different. He is tender, solicitous, as if they are pregnant women given to his care. He lets their fronds grow, until they form a huge whirl. Rarely does he take out his knife, he is happy to let it rest in its rusty holder.

Noses to the ground, the goats circle the tree. Soon, the ground beneath the palm is bare and the goats are content. Shortie sighs. There is nothing more to be done. He climbs up the slope and returns to the mud bank. His eyes travel over the wide field, past the goats, to drink in the sandy, breathtaking vastness. It stretches on and on, as if there is no stopping it.

To the south of the field flows a sunken canal that empties into a faraway human-made lake. When the monsoon rains come, the canal runs deep and wide. But there is no water in it now. Only a bushy undergrowth of shrubs, small trees

tall grass. Shortie's eyes narrow as they search the horizon's line. He cannot see anyone yet.

Ten days ago, hundreds of heads bobbed up and down that line. Men and women with their cattle and their scythes, men and women who came to harvest the grain at the grey-black hour before dawn. They have all returned to their villages, their homes, leaving behind a disconsolate and pining earth. A crow caws loudly in the distance. A she-goat calls to its kid. Sparrows chatter in high-pitched tones. A haunting sound emerges from the deep hollow of the lake. The air is full of voices, the field teeming with life.

In the middle of a plot, stands a solitary neem tree. On the mud bank, a little away from Shortie is the twin palm. Along the field's edge is a craggy rocky outcrop—the Big Rock—with its secret holes and crevices. The erukkan is everywhere, its broad leaves waving in the wind, like so many pairs of hands. Slender ridges that separate one plot of land from the next crisscross the field. The earth stays firm, enduring, gladly surrendering its dust to the wind.

Shortie waits. He has to, at least until high noon. Only then or even afterwards will the others come, one by one, leading their goats. Belly usually comes first. Once she is there, the world seems right. Her laughter and mocking voice hold the air, and he is not alone anymore. Then come Tallfellow, Stonedeaf and, last of all, Stumpleg.

Shortie hears goats calling from beyond the fields that lie on the other side of the lake. They belong to Sahibu Kaattu Gounder. But they will have to wait. Stumpleg brings them out to graze only in the late afternoon, after finishing his farm tasks. Shortie looks away from the horizon and searches for his goats. They are all gathered in a single plot of land, feeding intently on the tall grass that grows plentifully in these parts. They love it for its juice, its crisp taste. Shortie is indulgent. He knows that it is easier to herd them once they

have fed their fill. He counts the goats.

There is Veeran, a sacrificial goat, consecrated to the Munisami, god of fire and darkness. There is a bell around his neck but one hears it only rarely. Veeran is a graceful goat and feeds with quiet dignity. Then, Nedumbi. For a long time, she delivered only stillborn kids. But ten days ago, she managed a frisky kid that stays close to her while she nibbles at the grass. She is always hungry and wanting more.

Shortie is relieved. He has nothing to fear. Veeran and Nedumbi are herd leaders and if they are around, that means the goats are happy, content. Mollachi, Vattalu, Mooli, Vellachi, Soozhiyan, Konnakkalli, Monduvalli, Araikathan... fourteen goats in all.

It is well past dawn and the sun is visible above Tiruchengode hill. Yellow light floods the land. Its warm haze comforts the goats. Shortie does not have much to do. The goats are not likely to stray very far. Besides, there are no green plots into which they can sneak, when he is not looking. But he needs to call out to them from time to time. Maybe scold them now and then.

Shortie's eyes stray towards his tin lunch pail. There it stands, squat and long on one of the ridges. He has left it there a while ago. Already, a steady line of ants is crawling up the sides. He has screwed the lid on tight. Yet these maddening ants have smelt his food out. Unerring and sure, they are now on their way to feeding. He jumps down from the mud bank onto the ridge and picks up his pail. The ants scramble down hurriedly and scatter.

Shortie smiles. They had no need of his pail until last week. Then, the fields were thick with ripening grain. With the harvest ended, the ants need other food and have come to him. They have to rummage around until the next harvest. But they never go away, never give up on this dry earth.

He opens the pail—it is full of kanji, with two plump steamed kambu balls swimming in it. A few long, thin red chillies float on top. His Gounder Mistress probably pounded the kambu early that morning. The balls smell fresh. He draws his breath in, and waits for the aroma from the kanji to slide into his heart. Steamed kambu soaked in water smells divine He feels light, almost ecstatic. His mouth waters, and he wonders if he should at least drink a bit of the kambu kanji. But then he will have to go hungry in the afternoon. Shortie sighs and shuts the pail tight.

It is not like this everyday. Most days, the Gounder Mistress packs his tin pail with kambu balls from the day before. Thin, shrivelled, and smelling faintly of rot, they do not stir his stomach like this. But he waits every morning, resigned and eager, for the rotten balls. Like a dog, he thinks, much like a dog, anxious for its master's voice. He waits until the Gounder Mistress calls out, "Dai! Bring your pot!"

The sun is still climbing its way into the sky. Shortie picks up his pail and walks to the neem tree. It stands there, grand and spreading. He places the pail in a small, dry hollow at the base of the tree and hoists himself up on one of its branches. Sitting with his legs on either side of the branch, he rocks up and down. A while later, he swings from the branch, back and forth, back and forth. Then hangs upside-down, until he feels a dizzy madness in his ears. He jumps to another branch and does the same. And then to another and another. The neem's branches bend, creaking and swaying like dancing spirits. Shortie is a baby once more, wrapped tight in his cloth cradle, moving gently with the wind, letting it take him where it will. He laughs out loud.

Shortie's sudden mirth and the neem's loud rustle disturb the goats. They look up, bemused. Vattalu starts to run towards the tree, followed by the others. Shortie jumps down,

shouting:

"Vattalu! Off! Get back! Go! Go!"

Vattalu stands in her tracks, she looks sad yet cajoling. Her black eyes glint in the sunlight. The other goats stand still. The kids bleat, afraid and unsure.

"Aiy! Want to be fed? Want me to go collecting leaves for you? Can't feed on your own, Princess? Off now! All of you! Or I'll kick your behinds."

Shortie yells at his goats in mock fury. They return to their peaceful grazing. Vattalu is a spoilt creature. Unlike the others, she does not like to graze off the ground. She holds her head high and likes it when the herdsman feeds her a picking of leaves and stalks. She loves to plant her forelegs on the tall fences that circle fields full of crop and snap at the fresh green inside. She is a known leader of the pack, and many times in the harvest season has led the others to taste the forbidden ripened grain. Once, Shortie was forced to beat her, and he almost broke her leg. That did not deter her, though. She continues to be adventurous.

Watching the goats, Shortie feels something in his stomach, which pushes upward, till he knows it—a great desire to test his power over the herd. He knows that his herd looks up to him. Even when they are grazing peacefully, they are alert to his voice. They usually heed him when he calls out, "Ho, ho!"

He looks around. The goats are spread wide, all over the field. His eyes rest on Veeran. Veeran moves slowly, nose to the ground, unmindful of the tiny black sparrow perched on his back. Should he try calling Veeran? He has never tested him before, not once. What if Veeran ignores him?

Shortie hears the Gounder Mistress's harsh bellow in his ears. "Dai! You! Shortie!" Filled with resolve, he clears his throat. In a loud whisper, he calls out, "Dai, Veera!" He

tightens his jaw and tries again.

"Dai! Veera!"

His voice slashes the air, harsh and sharp, like the sting of the midday sun. The wide field returns his voice to him, a booming echo. Veeran jerks his head up. He looks at Shortie, his eyes anxious. Shortie feels the darkness in his head dissolve, sheer happiness courses through his skull and down his back.

What next, though? Shortie really has nothing to say to Veeran. But he must.

"Can't graze with the others? Needs his own kingdom… come here!"

Veeran looks puzzled. Shortie smirks—the goat does not know if he is really angry. Or only pretending. Veeran slips into a plot where several other goats are feeding. He ambles along, his bell sending out a clear, round tinkle. The sun has dried the dew off the grass. The leaves on the ground are no longer damp. Veeran's nose takes him to where he wants to feed.

Shortie continues to bask in his absurd happiness. Veeran has not disobeyed him, was held by the power of his voice. He is surprised and a little embarrassed that the Gounder Mistress's harsh tone is his now. The familiar voice that reaches him in the goat shed every morning, as he lies huddled in his ragged jute sack. Her voice is merciless. Even her husband, his Gounder Master, does not shout for him that way. Shortie dreads her call, a stinging whiplash that cruelly peels the sleep off his body. A tone he cannot ignore, that torments him into getting up.

In the early days when he had just began to work for her, he rebelled against that voice, tried to steal an extra minute of sleep, lying still for a few moments after she yelled for him. But soon he learned that it did not pay to disobey.

Thwack! One morning, a thin strip of leather caught his naked foot. At first he thought a monstrous mosquito had bored into his skin. The goat shed was full of big, black mosquitoes. He turned around and tried to sleep on. Thwack! He opened his eyes and heard a rasping voice float in through the dark.

"Here I am, yelling my throat dry! And you continue to sleep! A young lad like you should get up at once! I should starve you and then you'll know. You'll be up when I call for you. You've become lazy, that's what it is..."

He had been beaten! Whipped on the sole of his foot! Close to tears, but helpless, Shortie got ready for work. This happened a few times. Gradually, Shortie learned to wake up at the Gounder Mistress's first call.

As for the mosquitoes, they are still there. They hang in thick clusters, on the roof of the goat shed, on its walls. The goat shed is a natural mosquito breeder. Its mud floor is always wet with goat piss and shit. Shortie cannot ever hope to keep the tiny wretches away. They are at their worst in the monsoon months. Then he needs two jute sacks—one to lie on, and one to cover himself with. But they manage to pierce through his cover somehow. Often he has woken up to see mosquitoes hovering like bees around his face. Sometimes, he collects wild basil leaves, strews them in a circle around him, and curls up within that charmed ring. But the mosquitoes stay out only as long as the leaves are fresh. If he rolls over or kicks at the leaves, they are squashed and of no use. Then the mosquitoes return, vengeful and triumphant, to taunt him.

Sitting under the neem tree makes him sleepy. He yawns loudly and stretches out on the ground. The earth is cool. Its thin carpet of neem leaves and twigs grazes his skin. He looks up. He has always wondered at this single neem. Solitary and shady. How old is it? Through the delicate

tracery of leaf and twig, he spies a pair of sunbirds. They chase each other, springing lightly from branch to branch. His eyes follow their play but stop at a splash of black. The black-winged koel.

Shortie never loses a chance to seek out the secretive koel. He loves the bird's dark red eyes and black beak. The koel is a shy bird. It does not show itself easily. It changes its perch often and somehow manages to tuck its sheer black into the green of the neem. Shortie wonders if it feels his intent eyes roaming the neem's branches. But he never gives up. He goes round the tree, until he sees at least a bit of the bird's black tail between the leaves. If the koel flies away, Shortie makes a face.

"Loser, loser! Got you, got you!"

If the koel stays on despite his probing eyes, he is equally thrilled.

"Saw you! Saw you!"

It is his favourite game. But today, he is tired. He wants to close his eyes, not pursue the black bird. His body aches from working since dawn. He has been up a long time, since the cock's first crow.

The Gounder's cow shed is a messy place. It holds a pair of overworked oxen that help to draw water from deep, sunken wells, a milch cow, a pregnant buffalo, and two other she-buffaloes with their calves. The floor is always wet from the animals' piss and dung. The oxen and the calves shit huge mounds. Their dung is easy to cart away. But not that of the ageing she-buffaloes. They shit down their legs and their dung is loose and smelly. Whether they graze on fresh grass or feed on dried leaves and twigs, their dung remains the same. The pregnant buffalo is not too bad. Its dung is firm and almost dry.

The dung has to be gathered carefully, with dried palm

fronds. But a bit of dung always falls through the fronds. The Gounder does not like it if that happens. He has a thing about dung. He cannot bear to see it anywhere. If he sees some, his hands get to work right away, to fling it into his field or into the manure-hole. Sometimes he is seen rushing away with handfuls of dung to the outfield, beyond the house.

The Gounder likes his cow shed floor clean and swept first thing in the morning. He hates it if the animals are fed before the dung is removed. Sometimes, disgusted by cow feed and dung lying in heaps next to each other, he starts on the floor himself. His dhoti off his waist in a flash, he is seen bent to the floor, gathering turd. The Gounder Master in his loincloth—an angry man, whose wrath both shames and hurts. Shortie knows he must not let this happen too often.

After the dung-gathering, Shortie has to feed the animals. He fetches hay and dried stalks of the kambu to the shed. Huge piles that exhaust his thin hands. The animals immediately set up a chewing rhythm that follows Shortie as he sets about his next task. There is not a minute to be lost between his various duties. Just as he finishes with the animals, the Gounder Mistress shouts for him.

"Dai! Shortie!"

The voice never fails to startle him. Everyday. It grabs him by the neck and shakes him up.

"Coming!"

It is not enough if he replies. He has to be at her kitchen door that very instant. She has a big can of milk ready, fresh from the buffaloes and mixed appropriately with water. The can is open, with a rough cloth tied to its mouth as a lid.

Shortie has to take the can to where the nadar caste people live. This is not easy, for he has to hold the heavy can by the cloth. On no account must he touch the can

directly. Once he gets to the houses in the Nadar neighbourhood that buy milk, he sets the can down and stands away. The lady of the house opens the cloth lid, pours her share of the milk into a vessel and ties up the can's mouth once more. This happens in all the houses to which Shortie goes.

Back at the Gounder's with an empty can, and the Mistress is ready with her next command.

"Sweep the front-yard!"

Shortie does not need to be told this everyday. He slips into each task effortlessly, yet the Mistress lists each of his labours out for him. It is almost light when he finishes sweeping.

"Bring that bowl of yours!"

Shortie loves this part. If she forgets or delays her command for the bowl, he keeps sweeping the yard though he has already finished with it. At these times, the Gounder Mistress smiles and says, "Come, come! Enough of the sweeping. I didn't ask you to plough the yard. Take your coffee."

She pours thick milky coffee into the coconut shell that serves as his bowl and he sits by the kitchen door, leaning on it. He sips from his bowl, slowly, carefully, not wanting to lose out on a single drop. He cherishes this moment and wants it to never end. But it usually does, with the sound of the Gounder's slippered feet nearing the kitchen. The Gounder greets him every morning with the same question.

"Still here, Shortie? Isn't it time to take the goats out?"

His head bent down, he mutters, "Going now."

He jumps to his task, painfully conscious of the Gounder's eyes following his disappearing back, as he turns at the goat shed.

Belly always teases him about his Gounder.

"My Gounder this, my Gounder that! What airs! Just because you drink milk-coffee!"

"It's better than that black shit they give you. My Master's not a miser like yours."

"So? Go lick the butter on your Mistress's fat arms!"

Belly laughs and runs away from him into the wide expanse of the field.

Two

A ripe leaf falls on his face. It lies flat across his closed eyes. He stirs, opens his eyes, then closes them tight and frowns. He feels it still, a heavy hand on his eyelids, gouging his eyes out. He turns his head first one way and then the other. With each turn, the hand fastens harder. Long dirty blue-black nails protrude from it. A nail presses on his right eye, flicks the lashes open and stabs in.

He wakes up startled. His eyes burn. Something trickles out of them. He wipes his cheeks dry. The eyes continue to ooze. He cannot see. There is something heavy on his nose. He shakes his head violently. A small, yellowing neem leaf falls down.

He is ashamed but relieved.

How long did he sleep? He gets up and rushes out of the shade of the neem tree. The goats! He sees them ahead, grazing peacefully. The kids sleep in the furrows. His eyes skim the herd as he counts the number of goats in his head.

So he has not slept for too long. Maybe only as long as it takes to chew an areca nut. Usually, the goats stay close, but if he sleeps deep they might stray into the lakebed. Or even somewhere far away. The kids could go into the thick bushes by the lake, get stuck in the burr and the thorn. The fox and the jackal live there, or so the elders in the village say. A fox is known to go straight for a kid's throat, and all is over before even a small bleat escapes its frail neck.

Older goats are sharp. They might even find their way to Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's fields on the other side that are green with castor plants. Goats love to feed their fill of the budding castor leaves and stalks. But afterwards they suffer for it, feel drowsed, or else their feet buckle and they cannot

walk as before. Then he has to rush and look for someone to cure them. Worse, Sahibu Kaattu Gounder might spot the goats and come at him with his whip. Shortie winces at the thought. His back! That Gounder has several riding whips, and is never seen without one.

The sun rides high in the sky. Shortie pulls his loincloth into a firm knot across his hips and shakes the sand off his back. The prickly sand-dust does not fall off easily. He unties the ragged brown towel around his head, twists it into a rope, and runs it up and down his back. The towel comes away, damp and flecked with a million dirt-dots.

He cannot remember when he washed last. Let the others come, he thinks. They can all go to the disused field-well on the far side of the fields. Jump straight in at midday, with the sun distant in the sky. Last year they were there, splashing, bathing. This year, though, he has not gone to the well even once. The well sits old and abandoned, its walls broken and crumbling into the water. The water is green with slime and silt. Shortie remembers its taste well—thick on the tongue and slightly salty. They must try to find time to wash today. Somehow.

Thinking tires him. His eyes scan the horizon, looking beyond the furrowed fields and fixing on the Big Rock at the far end. He starts walking. His feet scrape the hard earth and startles a lone pheasant nesting in the leaf-filled furrows. He bends down and feels the ground. His fingers find the nest, as big as the palm of his hand. Four eggs lie there, shiny and white. He feels sad. Silly pheasant. Why lay eggs after the harvest? It must have been fooled by the dried stalks nodding into the furrow and laid its eggs in the cozy undergrowth of fallen leaves. He picks up the eggs, knots them into his soiled towel, which he lets swing on his shoulder. I'll fry them up for later, he thinks. He must make sure that Stumpleg does not find out. Bully, thinks he knows

best. And hates to be left out of things. Stumpleg, their leader.

He is almost near the tall twin palm. Where is Belly? Greedy girl! Must have drunk more than a belly-full of her Gounder Mistress's kanji. Get yourself here fast, he mutters. Busy, are you? Probably washing your Mistress's arse.

She works hard, he knows that. She usually finishes washing, scrubbing and cleaning by the late morning and is down in the fields with her goats before noon. Not today, though. Letting your Mistress chew your ears off with her prattle I'm sure, he thinks.

He takes his towel with its treasures off his back and lays it down carefully at the foot of the tree. The twin palm grows out of a single root which forks into two trunks. Their branches swirl out, cross each other and intersect in a complicated pattern. Shortie loves to shinny up one hard trunk, pick his way through the swirl and jump on to the other one. His back pressed against the comforting roughness of one trunk, he rests his feet on the other, and stays there, dangling.

Shortie and his friends often try to outdo each other in climbing the palm. It is not enough to climb fast—you have to climb higher than anyone else. Belly is one of the fastest tree-climbers in these parts. But she cannot climb very high. Her legs are short, like a hen's. Shortie is a little taller and can nimbly jump on to a higher branch. But she refuses to accept he is better than her. Each time they play this tree-climbing game, she insists she is better, because she is faster.

Shortie is almost halfway up the twin palm. He hears a flutter of wings. An eagle. It swoops down from the treetop and flies low, the shadows of its wings sketching a dark spread on the earth below. Shortie shades his eyes with the palm of his hand and looks north. No one in sight, not even a gamboling kid. He sees in the distance a gounder's house, shrunk to a point. Its red roofs gleam dully from afar.

No Belly.

He sits, his legs around the palm trunk. He slides down only when his knees start aching.

The roughness of the palm is consoling. Like a garden lizard, he wants to lie slack on that trunk. A while later, he comes down and sits leaning against the palm's roots. His eyes fix on the shallow pits in the furrowed plot of land, a few yards away. There are stones in some of the pits. Remnants of yesterday's stone-hunting game. He gets up and sits by the pits. Belly had won, as usual. She is swift and sharp with her counting.

Shortie starts to play the game on his own. He knows he will never be as good as Belly. She is younger than him by at least two years. And much shorter. Her stomach sticks out from her tiny body. Straw-stuffed-scarecrow. Shorter than Shortie, he mutters to himself. Every morning her Gounder Mistress scowls at her: "Foul Belly! Just a strip of a stomach, but always hungry. I keep pouring the kanji and still she holds her bowl out!"

Belly even remembers how much she is paid every year. How much she was spoken for, how much money her father received as an advance, how much of her pay remains with the Gounder, what amount her father would claim from that pay during the village temple festival: she knows it all. Shortie can never remember things like that. His mother and father take care of all that. Belly teases him about his ignorance. But he does not think it means anything.

"What's the big use? No one asks you anyway, you do what they tell you to..."

"So?"

"So nothing. Someone decides, takes the money. We graze the goats, that's all."

"Someone? So you call your own mother and father

'someone'?"

They fight over this often. And other things. He misses her. It does not matter if the others do not come: Stonedeaf, Stumpleg... but Belly... how her laughter rolls across the empty expanse of the field, scattering red dust in his face!

Maybe he should drink his kambu kanji. Then she'll surely come. The eggs! Would the pheasant have come back to them? She must have searched in vain. Shortie remembers a mad hen that tried to hatch old, smooth stones, thinking they were her eggs. Had the pheasant gone mad too? He has not heard her call. Maybe she flew away, thinking she laid her eggs somewhere else.

He goes towards a cluster of palm thorns that stand on the mud bank. A small woven palm box lies hidden in it. He takes it out carefully, making sure the thorns do not graze his hand. Inside the box are a few matchsticks, rolls of paper and a small hollow stone with some oil in it. He takes these to a nearby rock. Beside it sits a dried gourd, face to the ground. Shortie makes a fire and puts the gourd on it. He pours in the oil. He has salt but no chillies. He runs to his tin pail, opens it and picks the thin dried chillies that lie swimming in the kambu kanji. Back at the fire, he feels the gourd. It is warm. He throws the chillies in and watches them simmer and burst. He takes out the eggs wrapped in his towel, breaks them and pours their yolk into the gourd. He watches the yolk thicken and fry. He puts the fire out. Egg-curry ready.

The goats are scattered now, and all over the field. The grass is tough and they cannot keep at it for long. But they still nibble on. He hears the cackle of mynahs amongst the goats. Scores of them are out. They peck at each other, fall over, fight. A rash of mynahs gets in between the legs of a pair of goats. They squawk but the goats remain calm. Their heads to the ground, they chew on placidly.

Mynahs love this dusty season when the palm begins to put out buds and it is time for the toddy. They are clever creatures and go straight to those trees that have toddy pots tied to them. There are two sorts of pots that toddy-tappers use. Sometimes, they smear a pot with lime to collect palm juice that is sold fresh. Unsmeared pots are used for collecting toddy. It is these pots that attract the mynahs.

As the day advances, the mynahs fight even more. Their energies grow with the sun. They chatter, scream and chase each other across the field. Shortie loves watching them. He feels affectionate towards these rowdy birds. He does not ever go close, he knows they will scatter and fly away if he does. The mynahs remind him of home, in the chakkili quarter—the same loud chatter, the same happiness.

Some days, he chooses a bird. That's me, he decides, but after some time it is hard to tell which one it is. They all look the same and he gives up. One of them is me, he consoles himself. As the sun dips and the effect of the toddy wears off, the mynahs get ready to leave. As if the earth is no more theirs. Together, they fly into the sky and skim the air. After a while their wings buckle and they circle until they are ready to alight. They cannot fly long distances and have to rest from time to time.

If Stumpleg saw them he would surely hunt them down. He carries a small bow with him and never misses his aim. Shortie hates to see their happiness crumple and their wings take sad flight.

Shortie feels the heat of the advancing day. The sun pricks into his skin, like a nerunji thorn. The rock is hot, like a frying pan. He cannot sit on it anymore. An angry arrogant day. He walks back to the twin palm and sits in its short shade. He opens his pail and takes out the two kambu balls. He places one on the lid of the pail and crumbles the other one into the water. The ball on the lid gleams white and soft

like a lump of butter.

The Gounder Mistress never gives him more than two balls. One for the morning, one for the evening, is probably her reasoning. He must have more, at least four. Two for each meal. This year, when his father comes to claim his dues from the Gounder, he must make sure that they talk this out. If he asks for four he might get at least three. Nothing wrong in having four though. If he cannot eat them all up, there are always the crows and sparrows. They will thank him for the food. Then there is the dog.

He looks around, a faint smile on his face. The dog hasn't come today. God knows how it smells the kambu. Every morning it comes, bounding across rock and plot. It flops down in front of him and waits, its tongue hanging limply. How can he not give it some of his precious morning kambu ball?

"Poochi! Poochi!"

Nothing.

"Poochi!"

A few goats look up. Not here. Usually it is around, curled up in a dug-out sand bed. Maybe it would come when he eats in the late afternoon.

He eats the egg curry. Hot, but delicious. Onions go well with kambu balls and the kanji. But the Gounder Mistress is miserly. She gives him onions only if she can buy them cheap in the market. The rest of the time, he has to make do with dried red chillies. Pheasants' eggs are tastier than hens' eggs, he thinks. He has eaten hens' eggs twice before. The Old Gounder—his Gounder's father—sometimes takes out eggs that have failed to hatch and fries them in the yard next to the well. The fried eggs smell bad and are bearable only with roasted onion strips. He helps the Old Gounder when he does this, handing him firewood, clearing egg-shells. If

he is lucky, the old man gives him a scoop of egg-fry. Odd taste, but nice.

Stumpleg works for a Gounder household that is bigger. They own several hens that lay their eggs all over: in the barn, the bushes, underneath the hay. Stumpleg snoops them out and packs away a few from time to time. Those are good eggs. He fries them by the rock and everyone gets to eat a handful. Shortie drools at the memory, he remembers the taste of those white-and-yellow egg flakes on his tongue. But no one gets more than a handful. Stonedeaf alone gets an extra helping. The rest, Stumpleg eats himself. A bully. Lame bully.

Shortie holds the pail to his mouth and drinks some of the kambu kanji. It slides down his dry, parched throat. A cool, thin trickle. He wants to eat and drink more. But he must keep the second ball for the afternoon. Reluctantly, he returns it to the pail and screws the lid back on to it. He hangs the pail on the neem branch. Finding his loincloth loose, he tightens it, wipes his mouth with his towel and stretches his hands out and then up.

The goats have moved out, and are on the far side of the mud bank, where it runs along the lake. They must not be allowed to get into the lakebed. It is hard to herd them in that rambling vastness. He runs to where they are.

"Nedumbi! Mollachi! Back! Back! Up to no good? Think I'll let you go down there?"

The goats stop in their tracks, perturbed by the anger in his voice. A few train their sad-looking eyes on him.

"Serves me right, bringing you out early in the morning."

They turn back from the edge and start walking towards him. Perhaps they remembered the feel of his whip on their backs. Shortie starts counting... twelve, thirteen... he counts again. Still the same number. Veeran! Veeran is not there.

Running up and then sliding down the mud bank, Shortie reaches the lakebed. He hears goat sounds coming at him from the other side. From Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's goat shed. Veeran must have run across, probably smelt a she-goat in heat.

Shortie jogs across the lakebed, his feet finding a narrow path through flowering aavaaram bushes. A rabbit streaks across but he cannot stop, he must find Veeran. He reaches the other side of the lakebed, and clambers up the bank and into the fields. His ears catch the tinkling of bells. Veeran cannot be far away.

"Veera! Dai!"

He waits for a moment and starts running again, this time across fields of peanuts.

He sees him amongst the dried stalks. Veeran's nose is to the ground, his ears are up and alert. It is no use yelling. But what can Veeran do? Even if he gets to Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's shed, he will not be able to get in. He has to content himself with walking around and sniffing. Maybe he will stick his thing into a gap in the palm fence by the shed.

Shortie grins, his heart stirred by an awkward memory. Two days ago a young she-goat was in heat. Veeran couldn't be parted from her. He would run after her, forgetting even to graze. Maybe he remembers that day, who knows?

Shortie walks up to Veeran and stands in front of him, holding his stick high. Seeing his angry face and the stick, Veeran looks away and his body goes slack. Then he starts and runs up the mud bank and towards the lakebed.

Shortie feels indulgent. He cannot really beat a goat promised to god, can he? If it were not for that, he would have brought his stick down on Veeran, slammed it hard on his back till he crept back to the herd. The goat should have

been neutered long ago. But the Gounder Master was against it. "We need him. What if a she-goat gets into heat? Don't want to go hunting for a goat then!" Veeran was awful, though. He did not leave even the kids alone. He ran after them, smelling their behinds, trying to bite them.

"Try getting at the mothers!" Shortie calls out to Veeran. When not in heat, she-goats simply do not care. They ignore Veeran and if he troubles them, they butt him with their curled horns. At such times, Veeran edges away, his head down. But when one of them wants him he is there. He sticks to her in the evenings when the goats walk back to their pen and rubs against her. The she-goat is equally smitten. If Shortie drags Veeran away, or threatens him with his herdsman's stick, she bleats her heart out. Veeran looks distraught with longing and tries to pull away from Shortie. He gives up finally, only because he fears the stick.

Shortie is now on the mud bank. He has to slide down into the lakebed and climb up again on the other side. He hesitates. Earlier, worried about Veeran, he had not noticed the thick bushes of thorn and thistle, or the sharp, jagged stones that lie all over the bed. What if something comes at him from the bushes? Fear pounding in his heart, he walks back, not daring to look this way or that. He reaches the far end of the bed and climbs over to the other side. There, on the edge of the mud bank, stands a tired, sad Veeran.

Shortie pushes him ahead with his stick. When they reach his favourite grazing spot, Shortie flings aside his stick and rummages under a tree. He comes up with a pair of goat horns. He goes down on all fours, with the horns held over his head. Making himself small and snug, he rushes at Veeran.

Veeran leaps up and lunges at him. Startled by the feel of horn, he stands back for a moment. Then, summoning all his strength, he jumps again. Shortie scampers aside and

Veeran tumbles in the dust.

"Serves you right! Serves you right!"

Veeran looks abashed and runs away from Shortie and into the herd. He presses against a she-goat and licks her stomach. He then lifts his back leg and sloshes her with his piss. She is a young mother and does not really care. But Veeran does not give up. He retreats, but soon finds a kid and rubs himself against its downy back.

Shortie feels his body waking up. The run across the lakebed has lightened his shoulders. He looks up. It will be noon soon. No sign of Belly. He gets back to the twin palm. He climbs up and finds a perch. His eyes squint to a point. In the distance, he sees a small figure, dim in the hazy heat, leading a pack of goats.

Three

Belly's goats run down into the harvested plots of land. A white he-goat limps along, a little apart from the rest of the herd. Belly has tied one of his front and back legs together with a rope. He is a difficult goat and cannot be trusted to graze peacefully with the others. Holding her stick high, she comes swaying and running.

"Re-re..."

Shortie returns her greeting with a loud shout and races towards her. Her goats join Shortie's herd. Soon they fill an entire plot of land. Veeran is excited once again and sniffs behind the newcomers.

Belly's voice fills the field. The dry earth relents and flakes into joyful dust. Her stomach looks ready to burst, and the scrap of cloth she wears round her middle threatens to slip off. She ties it firmly about her waist and flops down on the mud bank. There are salt-patches on her body, where the sweat has dried. Her shaggy hair falls thickly on her neck in an unruly mess.

In the midday heat, even the sturdy crow has retired from its hunts and retreated into the shadowy green. Not Belly, though—she loves the heat, as others do the January moonlight. A while later, though, she follows Shortie to the dusty shade of the neem. As they sit down, she pulls the tail of the upper cloth she wears from behind her. There is a bulging knot at the end of it. She undoes it and takes out a thin palm root. It is white and greasy and flecked red with dust from her upper cloth. She breaks it into two and hands Shortie a piece.

"Where'd you get it?"

"She gave it to me..."

"Oho! Your Gounder Mistress's heart has suddenly grown!"

"Think she boiled it last night. See, it's gone bad. Smell it?"

He rubs his thumb and forefinger together. They feel sticky. He smells his thumb and wrinkles his nose. He shrugs his shoulders and eats up the root. Wiping his hands on the towel he wears on his head, he says accusingly:

"I've been all alone. For a long time... since dawn."

"Afraid? Scared a fox will eat you?"

"Stay out here alone and you'll know."

"Who says I haven't? It's only this year you're here early. Last year I used to be here on my own. Remember? The Gounder girl was at home then. Too bad they married her off! She did half my work... anyway I was never scared. You're the scared one. Scare-face!"

Shortie likes it when she talks big, like a grown-up woman. She reminds him of Nedumbi, who has just delivered her first-born. The way her head bobs up and down. Since the touch of dawn, he has heard only goat sounds and birdsong. How different the hum of the human voice is. His ear wants words. Words that her voice casts into his ears. He does not want anything else.

"It takes you so long to finish farm work?"

"What do you think? You don't know how much I have to do. Your Gounder Master helps you out. My mistress doesn't. Even if I'm late, they wait for me to clean the cow shed. Won't dirty their hands with dung. They're scared it'll stick to their skin. Sometimes, the stuff just lies there for two, three days..."

"My Master's not like that. Gets down to work himself."

"You mustn't let him. That's what we're there for. He doesn't need to do it, you know..."

Shortie knows what she is getting at. She never misses a chance to show up his Gounder Master in a poor light.

"Still, you can go to work earlier and get here faster."

"Go earlier and do what? Massage my Mistress's legs?"

Belly's life is not like Shortie's. He gets a yearly wage, and is fed three times a day. For this, he is expected to stay at the Gounder's house and do whatever work there is to be done. He does not go home to his parents often—maybe on festival days, or if someone dies. With Belly, things are different. Her Gounder Mistress feeds her twice, in the morning and afternoon. She comes at the first light of dawn and returns home when it is dusk. In spite of that she gets scolded for being too early or too late.

Belly loves to mimic her Mistress. She stands with her hip-cloth pulled up to show a bit of thigh. She often entertains Shortie for hours with her Mistress-voice, head cocked on one side like a garden lizard, right hand at her hip.

On days that Belly comes early it is, "Early, are we?" The Mistress' sarcastic tone and snide smile pin Belly down to silence. She rarely replies and starts to gather dung instead. A moment later, it is "Dumb owl! Can't open her mouth! Throw her some food and then see what happens. Opens her mouth wide. Cave-mouth!"

The days Belly comes late, the Mistress comes out with a different set of accusations. "Chakkili whore! What a time to come! Can't get up? Of course you'll snore into the day if you gorge yourself like a pregnant sow! What do you think we're here to do? Should we forget farming? Sell everything and pack off? Where's your father? Ask him to come around tomorrow. I have a thing or two to tell him."

The Gounder Mistress's voice pursues Belly as she finishes her work in the cow shed. It teases her ears, as she sits to drink her morning kanji. Belly feels tight and angry inside but knows she cannot, must not talk back. Sometimes though, inside the shed, she buries her face in a calf's downy neck and whispers her anger; or mutters into a buffalo's thick ear. They return her confidences with gentle, calm, sympathetic eyes.

If, by chance, the Gounder Mistress hears her murmuring she turns into an angry, fearful witch. "Aiy! What do you think you're doing? Think I've gone deaf?" Or "Is this play-time? A carnival? First you come late, and then..."

Belly retreats further into the shed and, gathering dung, mutters into the buffalo's ear. "Must have got it good from the Master last night..." Whenever Belly mimics her Mistress, tossing her head high and drawing out her words, the wide, sandy field crinkles into a huge smile.

"Deaf Owl! Arrogant bitch!" Shortie watches Belly open-mouthed as she throws these words about.

Belly finishes her share of the root and stands up. Rubbing her hands on her hip-cloth, she starts running. Shortie is startled. Have her goats run into the lakebed? No, they have not. They stand, their noses pressed to the ground, inhaling and swallowing the earth. He sees her by the twin palm. She stands, pressed into its short shade and with her back to him. She looks as if she is staring at something far away. He runs up, gathers a palm fruit and says:

"What are you..."

She turns around, shocked. There is a wet patch next to where she stands. Her black chest stands out thumping and slightly swollen. A stain of palm juice marks it like a scar. He sees that she is beginning to grow breasts. Like Stonedeaf, she'll have to wear a blouse soon. He grabs her hand.

"Why did you run off like that?"

She does not reply. Instead, she laughs loudly and runs away from him, towards the Big Rock. It stretches out, a long ledge of flame. She waits by it, glowing and incandescent. Shortie cannot bear to see her like this.

"Come into the shade."

She laughs again and walks to an old palm tree whose branches droop like so many arms and offer a thick shade. Belly and Shortie sit down. Shortie shakes her by the shoulder.

"Want to play five stones?"

She looks at him for a moment, her lips parted. Her teeth are stained brown with palm-juice. She shakes his hand off.

"Can't. Have to gather firewood."

Twice a week she gathers firewood. She makes a bundle and leaves it hidden near a hugely wooded neem tree by the disused field-well. In the evening, when the goats have been tied up and her work done, she sets off on the mud path that leads to her home. But only for a while. Then, making sure no one is watching, she slips into a side lane that brings her to the fields. She runs, jumps over the tall, broad ridges that separate one field from the next and reaches the neem. The twilight hour is almost past then, and dusk has settled on every bush and tree. Belly grabs her firewood and runs, till the fields are behind her and she is on the mud path again. Often, Stonedeaf waits for her there, leaning against a porter's stone, where weary women and men rest their bundles before they trudge on. Some days Stonedeaf too gathers firewood.

Belly's Gounder Mistress does not know that she gathers firewood while grazing the goats; or that she slips into the fields again at dusk to retrieve them for home. She is sure to beat Belly if she gets wind of it.

"I send you to graze goats and you go fiddling with sticks. What about my goats eh, what about them? Why do you need firewood anyway? Looking for an ugly piece of wood to beat me with? Thinking of burning our farm down?"

The Gounder Mistress's foul tongue knows no reason. But if Belly gifts her the carefully gathered wood, she is not displeased. She immediately hands out a handful of fried peanuts that have gone soft, or yesterday's puffed rice.

"Eat. Eat it on your way home."

On such days, she even sends Belly home early, well before dusk-fall.

"A young thing like you—how'll you go home when it's late and dark?"

Belly does not like to give her the wood. When she is asked, she picks up a few dried palm sheaths and hauls these to the Gounder's home. She gathers wood to help her mother who works all day in the fields, and returns home with aching ribs. Some mornings, when she leaves for work, with bits of sleep sticking to her eyes, Belly's mother calls Belly to her.

"Raamu! Bring back some wood today, will you? There's not a twig at home."

Only her mother calls her Raamu. Raamu, short for Raamayi, her given name. But no one knows that.

Shortie joins her in gathering firewood—palm sheaths, dried fronds, palm shells and the brown stalks of the aavaaram plant. He likes to snap off the aavaaram stalks. Dry and stiff, they do not come off easily. When they are pulled, their broken edges flare into sharp pinpoints that prick and draw blood. The aavaaram stalk is good for scratching the ground for edible roots. It also catches fire easily and burns steadily.

On the lakebed stand several big trees—there is no shortage of dried neem wood, and fallen branches from the

oonja tree. Here you can even snap deadwood straight off the trees. But if they were to lop off big branches, the trees would stand forlorn and scarred. Belly knows it is best to pick fallen bits of wood on the field near the mud bank. No one will notice they are gone, except the busy white ants that compete with her.

Soon she has enough to make a pile that she can balance on her head. Shortie looks around and sets off towards a large neem. Several tough-looking creepers lie entwined in its branches. He yanks at them till he has at least a yard of creeper. He plucks the leaves off and lays the creeper on the ground. First to go into the bundle are the palm fronds. On top of them, the aavaaram stalks. Then, palm sheaths, and last of all, the rest of the wood. Belly and he make sure that the creeper is tight at both ends. They tie the loose ends into a tight knot and stand back.

Just then Veeran and two other goats come scampering. Veeran must have seen Shortie pulling the leaves from the creeper. Probably thought it was meant for him.

"Cock up and go eat some grass! Think I'll give you these?"

Veeran halts for a second, but then begins to move towards him. He must know what is in the bundle. He smells it and nuzzles Shortie's feet.

Shortie puts a hand out and rubs his head. He bends down and places his cheek against the goat's own.

"What's it sweetie?"

Disappointed that the creeper is not for them, the other goats move away. Veeran stays, caught in Shortie's arms. He tries to free himself, but Shortie does not let him go.

"What does my pet want? Too hot for you? Want to lie down in the shade?"

Belly looks on in contempt. Veeran finally jumps out of

Shortie's hands and lands at her side. He tries to rub himself against her.

"Stop that! Don't mess with me!"

She pulls an ageing aavaaram stalk from the ground and brings it down hard on his hind legs. The stick is knotted, gnarled and strong. Veeran jumps back startled and yelps in pain. Bleating wretchedly, he trots back to the herd.

Shortie's face darkens with anger. His jaw tightens. True he scolds Veeran sometimes, but never really seriously. If, even by chance, his leg touches the goat, he bows down and begs his forgiveness. Surely Belly knows about Veeran. He is the Muni's goat. How dare she beat him?

"Why hit him like that?"

"Why not? Hurts you? Hurts you if I hit him?"

She laughs. Shortie grabs her by her hair and brings his knuckles down on her head. As soon as he lets go of her hair, she grabs a sharp stone from the ground and aims it at his leg. It gets him on his heel. He winces in pain, picks up a bigger stone and flings it after her. She starts running and the stone misses her. She gathers a clump of dried earth and throws it at him. He moves away, it falls down and scatters into dust.

"Leftovers-eating dog! Ugly bastard!"

"Stubby-leg! Never seen a girl like you! Stupid whore! No shame!"

Disgusted, he walks towards the shade of the neem. She goes into the field where the goats are grazing and separates her flock from his. Veeran lets out a protesting bleat.

"Shut up! You and your master! What a pair. Him with his long-tailed loincloth!"

Belly drives her goats away towards the field-well. They scramble together, pecking at the ground. She lets them into a big plot and finds a place to sit, on the raised bank by the

well. A solitary coconut palm stands next to the well. From where she sits, she sees it clearly. The only sign of life in an otherwise dry spot. Someone must have hauled water from the well in the past and helped it grow. It is a slender, droopy tree with a few thin fronds and small nuts. A waterless tree bleached white by a sun that greedily sucks in its green everyday. Belly feels tenderly towards the coconut palm. Her eyes remain fastened on it.

Belly never talks back to the Gounder Mistress. She mutters to herself from time to time but is always scared that the Mistress's sharp ear will catch some of it. What if her father is called in and told to take her away?

"Ungrateful wretch! Take this miserable piece of ill-luck home!"

There are so many chakkili boys and girls to choose from that it does not really matter to the Mistress if Belly is sent home. But not so for Belly. If she left this household, she would be thrown into another, perhaps worse one. Her father is in fact waiting to do just that. He wants to pledge her to Vettu Kaattu Gounder as a farmhouse servant. Bone-breaking work. No time to look, wander, or even piss or shit.

Belly's brother, Bottle Gourd, works for Vettu Kaattu Gounder and she knows what a hard time he has. Her father and mother want to find a bride for him. But who wants to marry a farmhouse servant, pledged to the Gounder? So her parents are waiting to get her brother out of the farm and put her in his place. That way, he would be freed to work as a regular labourer in the fields. He wouldn't have to do odd jobs anymore, slave for the Master and Mistress in the house. And, more important, he would be able to make a respectable marriage.

When Belly was old enough to work, her father cast about for a suitable workplace for her. At that time, Vettu Kaattu Gounder did not need anyone to work around his farmhouse.

So she was sent to her present Master, the Periya Kaattu Gounder, even though this farmhouse was far from where she lived.

Belly fears Vettu Kaattu Gounder's farm. If her father does take her away from her present job and sends her there... she can cry and protest, be obstinate, threaten but besides that, what more can she do?

Vettu Kaattu Gounder owns the largest farm in these parts. He is the local 'big' man. Several chakkilis work for him, including Belly's father. There is work for everyone throughout the day. If, for some reason, Belly's father does not come to work of a morning, he is invariably sent for.

"Whoever heard of a farm chakkili staying at home? You're all so eager when it comes to getting your measure of grain. You don't even wait for the harvest to be brought home! You stand there on the threshing floor and demand your share. But mention work and you scratch your head!"

The Gounder loves to remind Belly's father—and indeed everyone else—of their duties. Her father is a leather-worker. He makes and repairs slippers and water-holders. The Gounder owns three huge wells. Throughout the year, labourers haul water for his fields. This strains the leather holders that are plunged deep down into the well to scoop up water, and they need to be mended from time to time. The mending has to be done carefully, for even a small slit lets water through when the holder is full. And if that happens, the blame falls on him.

"Rascal! Call yourself a leather-worker?"

The Gounder's household is a large one, around ten people in all. They, especially the men, need hardy slippers. Huge ones, with stiff leather soles, that are difficult to make. And if he is not mending and making slippers, Belly's father is by the well, helping to haul water, managing the bullocks that go round and round, dragging the giant levers that haul

the huge water-holders from the depths of the well. During harvest time, there is much to do and he is expected to stay in the fields till sundown.

Belly's mother has an even more difficult time. The Gounder Mistress makes sure of that. She has to pound kambu, clean the corn, and run the grain through a sieve. Of a day huge amounts of grain are cooked—for the household, the farmhouse workers and the labourers—and bushels of it have to be cleaned.

For their troubles the labourers are paid at the end of the year. Two or three baskets of grain for the men. Women get paid separately. The grain is never enough. Certainly not for a whole year. Yet the chakkilis compete with each other for work on the Gounder's farm. They know that if one of them does not wish to work, there is always another to take his place. This is why Belly's father is careful. If he loses his job, how are his children to eat? At least now, they eat one meal a day. All the same, he need not anymore worry about his eldest. That bird has grown wings and can wing his way through the world and fetch prey on his own. Belly is not badly off either. But the three small ones need care.

If Vettu Kaattu Gounder insists that Belly work in his farmhouse, she will have to go. There is no escaping it. She can do what she likes, cry, yell, scream but ultimately, she must leave this wide field that stretches on and on. Leave behind days in the sun with the goats and her friends, the jumping and prancing about trees.

Vettu Kaattu Gounder would make sure that she never got away from his land. Unlike now, she will not be allowed to graze goats in the wild. And since he does not allow other goats on his land, she will be alone under this sky. Solitary when she lifts her face to its vastness. And nobody to help with the goats. She cannot turn away even for a moment. Not like now, when she can leave the goats behind

with the others. She must stay with them, walk in and out of their grazing paths, trace her way through their hoof marks. And there will be many more of them. A large flock, an empty grazing spot, surrounded by grain fields and the fear that the goats might stray and wander…

Belly shivers. No, she will hate it there. She knows her brother loathes the work. Every time he comes home he weeps and vows he will never go back.

"Love, another year or two and you'll be out of it. Then, it's fieldwork—you know that's not so bad. No, don't cry. Please. If you fuss, that's the end of us. There are a hundred devils here, waiting for you to leave. And then..."

Bottle Gourd sits on his haunches, his head in his hands. His mother's words weigh him down. He fears to look up and if he does, his eyes, heavy with questions, want and longing, bore into hers. She averts her face at such moments and turns to whatever work is at hand. Some days, though, her eyes scour his face in anger. She cannot bear his whining.

"Rascal! Get lost! Go! You'll know then, know what it is to not eat, to feel your arse go dry and burn with hunger. "

"Go to that Gounder yourself. Go, since you have such a thing for him."

He yells back, his mouth spilling over with angry hurtful words. His mother brings a damp log of firewood down on him. He screams and tries to avoid her blows.

No, how can she go there? Even when her mother wishes Belly to go with her to the Gounder's house on a festival day, a special occasion, she refuses. What if the Gounder spies her, hiding behind her mother's sari and exclaims:

"Ha ha! Your girl is big now. Why don't you send her to work here?"

Even if her father were to explain that she was working elsewhere, the Gounder was sure to insist.

"So what? I'll settle it with that fellow. Leave her with us."

What can her father say? After all Vettu Kaattu Gounder feeds them, clothes them. Her mother knows that Belly fears being led to work for Vettu Kaattu Gounder. Each time they quarrel, she taunts her.

"Wretched girl! Wait till we throw you into that Gounder's care. Then you'll know."

Belly immediately stops arguing and sets up a loud wail. Her mother allows her to cry on and then raps her hard on her head with her knuckles.

"Idiot child! Think I'll really send you there? Of course not!"

Belly's wailing does not stop though. Slowly and gradually, her tone drops and her chest heaves to a quiet. But she knows that her father would have none of this. If it came to that, he would drag her by her tangled hair and leave her in the Gounder's house.

On the days that they talk of her doing well someday in Vettu Kaattu Gounder's farm, Belly's world shrinks. She does not even want to talk to Shortie. Sullen and fearful, she sits stubbornly silent. On such days, Shortie tries his best.

"Trouble with your Mistress? Did she yell at you?"

He goes on with his questions until she is forced to talk.

Belly likes life with her present Gounder Mistress. Brisk work around the cow shed, cleaning, washing, scrubbing and in a trice she is done. Then it is only the goats, herself and the field. The Gounder Mistress's tongue is of course a problem. But not if she trains her own to keep still.

Earlier, when Saroja, the daughter of the house was around, things were even better. She and Saroja worked together and sometimes, when the sun was high and the air stiff with heat, they sat on the porch of the house and played

a game of dice. Saroja also fed her tidbits secretly, gave her oil to massage her head and gifted her faded ribbons.

Now Saroja is married and away, but whenever she visits, she calls Belly to her and talks fondly. Saroja's brother, Mani, is different. He waits for a chance to hit and kick her. At such times, she curses him inwardly and tries to run away from him.

Everyday Belly gets up early and walks the long distance to the farm. But she does not mind. She likes walking alone at dawn and at dusk. She walks to the harsh chatter of crows that crowd the tamarind trees along the mud path, running from her home to the main road. Once on the road, she is excited by the odd bus or car. She stands till they pass her, waving her hands in greeting, and laughing. Her heart lifts and she prays that her father should let her work at Periya Kaattu Gounder's the next year as well. Sometimes she shares her worries with Shortie. Often he is reassuring.

"Your Gounder Mistress will never let you go, so don't worry."

But if he is angry with her, he says things that hurt.

"Wait and see. Next year you won't be here to enjoy the crows and the rabbits. You'll be alone in Vettu Kaattu Gounder's fields."

At this, Belly's face falls. She feels no one really cares for her. That the whole world is against her. Poor strong Belly—she talks tough, sings merrily, but a single fear sits snug and heavy in her heart.

Shortie is still raging inside. How dare she beat Veeran? Just like an idiot girl. Veeran didn't butt her. Didn't go at her belly with his horns. He only wanted to rub himself against her. Was that wrong? She doesn't know a goat's affection. She has grown arrogant on the shit she feeds on at home. Maybe her mother and father bring her all sorts of shop-

eats, tied up in big parcels. She gorges on them, no doubt, and gets bloated with pride.

But why hurt his Veeran? Why not her goats? Or her great Master? Or that vile-tongued Mistress of hers, who wags her tongue at her all the time? Or even Mani, who never misses a chance to pinch her cheek and tease her? No, of course not. She cannot be vain and angry with any of them. But with Veeran, a mite, a small piece of flesh, she shows off! What if he sneaks on her and tells her Mistress that she picks firewood everyday? Complains that she leaves her goats alone and steals away to gather a large bundle? That'll serve her. The Mistress will lash her back with the Master's whip until she bleeds. Then she'll learn.

Troubled and angry, Shortie looks now and then in the direction of the field-well where Belly sits. Let her graze her goats by herself. They are sure to stray into the lakebed. Then she'll need his help to bring them back. Who cares? Let her run after them herself.

Shortie continues to stare at her, till he cannot bear it anymore. He gets up, stretches and starts walking towards where she sits. His goats have already moved and are now near the field-well. He sits facing her. She makes a face at him. He remains quiet, and stares at the field, the goats and the sky.

The sun is a pot of fire, spilling heat into the sky. There are almost no clouds. A broken shell of a moon is visible high above him. An old, tin moon that has lost its whiteness to the sky. Waves of heat shimmer across the field. The goats in Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's pen continue to bleat.

He turns to her to find her eyes fixed on him. She throws her head back and her face crumples into a clownish smile. She looks comic and he wants to laugh, but decides he must not. She does not speak and he takes it to mean that she wants to make up as well. He touches her on the shoulder.

She shakes his hand off.

"I won't yell at you like that again. I only said that you shouldn't hit Veeran."

"You did not. You cracked me on the head with your knuckles."

Her voice is teary.

"Didn't think it would hurt that much. Come, let's play."

"You don't know how much it hurt. "

"I got hurt too. Remember that stone you threw at me? Tit for tat—we're even now."

She remains silent. Shortie walks away, looking for five smooth round stones.

Four

It is past noon when Stonedeaf and Tallfellow herd their goats into the field. Unmindful of the gaining heat of the day, the goats scatter into the plots, their noses itching for the grass. Shortie's goats are tired now. So are Belly's. Having fed well, they retire to whatever palm or bush shade they can find. Beneath the thin coconut palm by the well is an upturned palm shell with water in it. Thirsty goats with their kids pressing close to them drink from the shell. Shortie keeps it filled. The water is slightly salty but the goats are used to it. The kids drink longer and then run after their mothers.

It is resting-time for Shortie and Belly. They need not run after the goats now. Till sundown, the goats will lie in peace, chewing cud. It is enough to get them out of the shade late in the evening. Belly's white he-goat is a troublemaker, though. He refuses to lie down, or mix with the other goats. Though his front and hind legs have been tied together, he tries to jump and pull at the leaves of low trees with his mouth. No one can tell what he will do next. God knows why the Gounder bought such a rascally goat in the first place.

A round-faced baby sits on Stonedeaf's hips. A glowing black butterball, he appears stitched to her body. Clearly, he does not want to be set down. But Stonedeaf peels the child off her and dumps him under the coconut palm. He starts crying and tries to stand up, holding onto her legs for support. Once steady on his feet, he throws his hands up, demanding to be held.

"Little beast!"

Stonedeaf curses the child and sits down. He climbs onto

her lap. Shortie stretches his hands to the child. A tight black clay ball lands in his arms. He holds the child up and makes a face. The baby gurgles. He throws him up and catches him deftly as he comes down. The baby starts wailing. But Shortie does not stop. He throws him up once more and then again and again, as if the baby was a bouncing ball.

It is Belly's turn next. She snatches the child from him and does the same. The child sails up, his hands thrust out and stiff with fear, and lands in her arms, open-mouthed and screaming. The silver anklets on his feet catch the sunlight and shine. They let out a tinny shudder that holds the air for the briefest of moments. The child's belly strains against the black silver-flecked string which lies like a band around his hips. Tallfellow too joins in and happily throws the baby up and down.

Glad to be free of her burden, Stonedeaf watches the pass-the-baby-game placidly. But as the passing and throwing gets more and more intense, and the baby's cries more piercing, she gets fearful.

"Aiy! Enough!"

She snatches the child from Tallfellow's hands. He sneers.

"See how she loves him!"

"Oh, and why not? Tell me Pet, why not?"

Tallfellow looks sly and whispers to Shortie.

"Who knows, she probably even breast-feeds it!"

Shortie laughs. Stonedeaf knows they are talking about her but does not reply. Instead, she throws a searing glance at Tallfellow. The child fastens himself around her. His face is tear-stained and snot drips from his nose. Stonedeaf squeezes the snot out of his nose and wipes his tears away. She pulls out a small milk-holder from her bag and gives it to the child. The child grabs it eagerly and starts drinking. He stops, sobs and tries to drink again, but his weeping

takes over. His body shudders as he keeps up a low howl. Stonedeaf is suddenly afraid. What if the child gets fever out of fear? What if he refuses to sleep at night? She will be blamed if this happens.

"See how you've scared the little thing!"

"As if he's yours!"

Belly mocks her. The child continues to whimper and sob. Stonedeaf holds him close to her chest and pats his back to get him to sleep.

Stonedeaf's Gounder Mistress has always been sickly. She looks frail and withdrawn, like she cannot walk even a few steps without falling into a faint. People wonder how she has borne such a beautiful, healthy baby. Is he indeed hers? The Mistress takes to her bed often, and leaves most of the household work to Stonedeaf. Stonedeaf has to not only clean the cow shed and the yard, but also do the work her Mistress would otherwise have done—work which an 'untouchable' chakkili is usually never called upon to do.

Her Gounder's house has a covered veranda in front with two doors at either end. The one leads to the cow shed and the outer yard, and the other to the well. Stonedeaf's Mistress usually keeps the door leading to the well shut and bolted. This is the door that the Gounder uses to come into the house. As soon as Stonedeaf finishes her shed and yard work, her Mistress motions to her to come into the house. Once she is inside, Stonedeaf is made to sweep, mop and wash vessels.

Stonedeaf's Mistress has made her promise that she will not tell anyone that she does housework, especially about the vessels. If, of a day, the Gounder comes home at an unexpected hour and knocks at the door, Stonedeaf slips out of the door leading to the yard. No one ever knocks at the yard-door.

At times, Stonedeaf even washes clothes for her Mistress. But this is when the Gounder goes out of town. Stonedeaf sometimes thinks her Master knows that she helps around, but prefers to keep quiet. For her part, she guards her secret jealously. The Mistress is kind and feeds her portions of the meal cooked for the day. So Stonedeaf actually gets to eat cooked rice most mornings. Her mother wonders often how Stonedeaf looks plump and healthy. After all, she does not have all that much to eat at home.

Everyone, including the Gounder, knows that it is Stonedeaf who looks after the baby. She takes the child with her when she leads the goats out into the field and keeps him with her till sundown.

Comforted by Stonedeaf patting his back, the baby goes to sleep. She carries the sleeping baby to the shade of the neem. Holding him tight, she bends down to lay a towel on the ground. She leaves the baby on the towel and looks to see if there are any ants around. Satisfied there are none, she sighs. She is free now—to talk to the others, play games. For the next couple of hours maybe.

Suddenly, she feels exhausted. Her lap and hands go slack and become almost weightless. She knows that it is partly her fault. If she had trained the baby to play around her, he would go about on the ground and grass all day long. But then, at the end of the day, she would have to take home a dusty, dirty baby. What if the Mistress scolds her? Which is why she never takes him off her hips. Of course, he loves to perch there and protests loudly if she tries to set him down.

Stonedeaf and Belly sit down to play a game of five stones. Stonedeaf is good at throwing a whole cluster of stones up and catching each one of them as they come down. Her fingers cup the falling stones swiftly and gracefully. Playing five stones relaxes her. The baby is heavy and her

left shoulder and arm ache so much that she wants to unscrew them from her body. After a game, she feels her body lighten and come alive. She is able to rest her back and smile easily.

Shortie and Tallfellow go to gather fresh palm fruit. The palm's soft, fleshy kernel is fragrant and delicious. On his way to the field, Tallfellow has noticed a short palm tree, laden with a single nut-cluster. A small tree is easy to climb—wrap oneself tight around the trunk and go up in short brisk jumps. The trunk is hard and rough and scratches the climber's chest, but since it is a short tree, it is not too bad. A tall tree is a different matter. Hugging it for long can scar a climber's chest and cause it to bleed. Tallfellow is a good climber and looks forward to it. He has a long palm thorn in his hands to scoop out the kernel.

As they make their way to the short palm, Tallfellow sets up a chatter.

"Where's Stumpleg?"

"He'll come later. Close to evening, maybe."

"Must be hard for Stonedeaf."

"Hard, why hard?"

Tallfellow does not reply immediately. Instead, he picks up a thin sliver of rock and flings it up high and straight. It soars above them and lands past two large plots of land. He bends down to pick another and asks Shortie:

"Notice anything new about Stonedeaf?"

"Mmm..."

"What do you mean mmm...? Watch when Stumpleg comes. He'll go stick himself to her. Just watch how he keeps staring at her blouse..."

"I've seen him, yes..."

Tallfellow is furious. With a vicious curve of his hand,

he flings the second sliver of rock as fast as he can. It hits an old grizzly palm. The tree shudders lightly. An eagle nesting on its tallest branches is startled and flies away. Shortie watches the bird till it is a point in the sky.

"So you know everything, Shortie? Everything? Fuck you..."

Tallfellow's tone is harsh. His voice leaps out of his hardened, black body and stings Shortie like a whip. Shortie looks across to where Stonedeaf and Belly sit talking and playing. He can only see Stonedeaf's back. She sits cross-legged, in her ragged, faded long skirt and blouse. The blouse is an old one. It has shrunk and become short. Between her skirt and blouse a thin line of flesh can be seen. He wishes she had a longer blouse. Stonedeaf is tall, taller than him. She can easily pick him up and put him on her hips, like she does the baby. She is a beautiful girl, he thinks. He likes the way she moves.

Tallfellow is already up on the short palm. With his legs firmly placed on a broad frond, he squats, shades his eyes and looks into the distance. No one around. Even the gounder homes with their red roofs are not visible. As if they have faded into the day's furious haze. In the east the Tiruchengode hill is red and glowing, like a coiled red snake with its hood held high.

Tallfellow's Old Gounder Master has taken to his bed. He lies on it all day long. Beneath the bed is a pan. Whenever the Old Gounder wants to piss or shit, the pan is brought forward. The old man loves to eat and has no sense of what he crams into his mouth. He wants his toddy too, at least twice a day. No wonder, then, that every morning, his pan is almost full. He has three sons. Not one of them comes to his bed. Neither do their wives. He lies waiting to piss and shit, until Tallfellow arrives for the day's work. If, for some reason, Tallfellow is late, the old man grits his teeth and waits. And

when he comes he barks at him, his face contorted and lined with discomfort.

"Where the hell did you go?"

"Doing cow shed work, as you know."

Tallfellow's tone is deliberately placid.

"Shed work! Fuck shed work!"

Tallfellow feels pity for the old man. And anger. But he usually never replies and walks away with the pan. If he wrinkles his nose or makes a face, the old man yells at him.

"Smells, does it? Is chakkili pee sweet-smelling by any chance? Fucker!"

Tallfellow does not wish to provoke him and tries to hold his breath without letting the effort show on his face.

The Gounder's room is a former cow shed. It has a single back wall with a low sloping woven roof and thatched sides. As soon as he became sick the shed was made over into a room. It contains his bed and three huge stone seats for visitors. No one comes though, except his daughter. She visits once a month, sometimes once in two months, and brings him things to eat.

Tallfellow keeps the Old Gounder clean. First, he takes away his pan and pours the piss into a distant pit dug for the purpose. The Gounder is beside himself, waiting for him to come back. Tallfellow returns the pan to the floor near the bed and goes out and waits. When done, the Gounder calls his name out aloud. A strong, old voice that still sparks with authority.

Not very long ago, the old man could walk, though he could not see very well. A tall stick in his hand, he went about his house and fields. On one such field walk, he slipped on a patch of loose soil and fell face down. His leg cracked against a huge black stone and he broke his shin bone. He has taken to his bed since. Several healers have

been called in. Everyday, a man massages his leg with herbal oil. But the leg continues to lie useless. No medicine can restore life to ageing bones and slack old muscles.

Tallfellow takes the pan of shit to a corner of the shed and goes out to bring a pail of water and a bar of soap kept for the old man's use. No one else uses that pail or the soap. The old man lies on his side, waiting. Tallfellow pours water over his buttocks slowly. With great effort, the old man brings his hand to his arse and cleans himself. Tallfellow is afraid that someday, unable to help himself, the Old Gounder will ask him to clean his arse. He hopes it never comes to that.

Once the arse-cleaning is done, he has to carry the pan of shit out to a field that serves as a compost heap. This is the most difficult of his morning tasks. He holds the pan high above his head and flings it as far away from him as possible. It hits the ground and turns over. He has to make sure that the pan is fully emptied, bring it back and clean it thoroughly.

Every morning, he wants to throw up. His stomach churns, his insides twist and turn, and he feels as if his entire body is dripping with shit.

"Old Bastard! Why can't he die?"

He curses him wholeheartedly while washing the pan. Once he is done, he kicks the pan and sends it crashing. But he has to be careful. The pan must not break. That would bring the old man's wrath down on him. When he goes back to the shed to leave the pan under the bed, the old man looks at him for a brief flickering moment—with something like affection in his eyes.

Next, he has to prepare the old man's bath. He warms a pail of water for him. As the water boils on a makeshift fire in the yard next to the shed, he carries the cot with the old man on it out. He then carries the water pail, with a mug, to the cot

and pours a mug of water down that wasted body. The old man sits up and washes himself. He puts out his useless leg and Tallfellow pours several mugs of water on it. Once the washing is done, the old man has to be handed a fresh loincloth. Tallfellow moves away, while the old man changes. The old man insists on it, to Tallfellow's utter annoyance.

"Old bastard! As though he has a golden cock!"

The old man sits in the sun till the cot and his body dry. He lies still, with his eyes shut. A shriveled brown body, like a dried banana leaf. When he is fully dry, Tallfellow carries him back in and then goes about the rest of his work.

He washes his hands several times with cow dung. He sniffs at his fingers. They continue to smell of the old man's shit. He only forgets his fingers and the Old Gounder when he is out in the fields with the goats.

On the days that Tallfellow is not around, the old man suffers. He lies in his piss and shit, waiting for someone to come. Sometimes no one does. When Tallfellow does come finally, he calls out his name piteously and holds onto his hands.

"You're like my son! How will I ever repay you? Pay for this sin of making you clean my shit?"

At such times, Tallfellow feels a tug of pity at his heart. But he wants to free his hands from the desperate old man's grip and get away as fast as he can from him. He hates looking after the old man. Hates it more than anything else he does. But he has no choice. His grandmother often consoles him.

"Don't feel bad. He's like our god! Think that you're doing this for your own grandmother."

Tallfellow's mother left him when he was a year old. She moved in with another man and later married him. She has three children by that man now. She sees Tallfellow from time

to time, but apart from a polite "Are you well?" doesn't really care. His father is worse. He lives in the same village but whenever he sees Tallfellow he looks at him with pure hatred.

"The bastard's not mine. Who knows who his father is? Some rascally chakkili or even a feckless gounder... only his mother knows the secret..."

Tallfellow has grown up with his grandmother. She never tires of telling him and whoever else is interested in listening to her how much she has suffered to raise him. She always ends her tale by recalling the Old Gounder's generosity.

"If it weren't for him, you'd be dead by now. Dead and buried there, with tall grass grown over your grave. For one year, I got you milk from that household. Paid for it sometimes, by working. At other times, got it free. Whenever you were sick, I'd run to him for help. You really mustn't grumble about looking after him."

Tallfellow is unmoved by these stories. He does not want to clean shit forever. Some days he is so disgusted that he wants to fling the shit-pan and its contents in the Old Gounder's face. Other days, unable to take the old man's foul whining, his fingers itch to grab his scrawny neck and snap the life out of it. Often, he wishes him dead. But he also feels sorry for him, and wonders if he should not have more compassion for an aged suffering soul. With great effort, he buries remorse and pity deep in his heart and chants to himself.

"The old motherfucker must die. Must die. Must die..."

Squatting now on a palm frond, he lifts up a cluster of palm fruits and cuts them away from the tree using his palm thorn. A palm thorn is not like a scythe yet it will have to do. Excellent fleshy fruit. Once the cluster is freed from the tree he flings it down. A few fruits from the cluster roll and scatter away from the tree. Shortie picks them and brings them to the shade.

Tallfellow shinnies down. His legs feel like water. His chest is scarred and flecked with tiny drops of blood. Shortie takes the palm thorn from him and cuts open a fruit. It opens easily, squirting its juice in his face. Tallfellow holds his hand to gather it. He rubs the juice all over his body. Shortie does the same. Palm juice cures prickly heat and is cool on the skin. They open up three more fruits and suck in their fleshy whiteness. Then they carry the remaining four to where the others are.

The palm is eaten up soon. Its kernel slides down the throat and dissolves nicely inside and leaves one wanting for more. Belly looks glum. She must have lost the game to Stonedeaf. Or maybe she is hungry. An empty stomach troubles her. She has to fill it with whatever she finds. Even if she were to eat up an entire palm-cluster, she would still feel hungry. Shortie knows that two palm fruits are nothing to her.

They must move elsewhere—away from the well and towards the lakebed. Get out of the shade. The shade has an intensity that rivals the sun. It burns the body as much, in fact, more. As if it wished to kick out those who came to if for refuge.

"Aiy, Shortie! Want to go down to Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's field and look for peanuts?"

Belly appeals to him but something in her tone makes him feel that she has made up her mind to go, whether he wants to or not.

"Of course!"

Tallfellow's face falls. He watches the two leave the shade and hurls angry abuse at their backs.

"Swine! I won't help gather your flock!"

"Who cares if you do or don't! Sister Stonedeaf will."

Belly's reply is tinged with scorn.

If anyone wants a favour out of Stonedeaf, all they have to do is call her "Sister". She loves to be called that. Anytime, anywhere, she hears that word clearly. Stonedeaf's ears shut out the world when she is at her Gounder's. When she comes out with the goats into the field they pop, and miraculously enough she hears everything—even the plaintive sunbird, hidden deep in the errukan bushes, whose tune hits the air like a fine needle, scratching it into a thin silvery whistle.

Stonedeaf does not even mind that Belly has walked out of the game they have been playing.

"Go on, Belly! I'll take care of the goats."

Stonedeaf does not mind them going for another reason. She knows they will bring her peanuts.

Shortie shouts at Tallfellow. "Nothing for you, Tally! Nothing for those who don't help out!"

"Get lost, Shortie! Don't want your bloody nuts! If your goats stray away, you'll get it from the Gounder."

Tallfellow is afraid, though. He knows they will return with lots of nuts. And make a point of shelling them before him and eating while he watches. He will have to content himself with looking on as their teeth crunch on the nuts. And they will make it worse for him, chewing elaborately, munching slowly and making faces. He does not want to give in to them but even more, does not want to be left out when Belly and Shortie return with the nuts.

"Alright. I'll keep an eye, but only if they go over the mud bank."

"Only if you keep an eye on them wherever they stray. Otherwise nothing for you!" Shortie is relentless.

"And keep an eye on my white he-goat. The rascal takes any chance to run down into the lakebed." Belly's voice reaches him from far away.

Belly sprints down the mud bank in skips and jumps. She is as nimble as a rabbit and easily avoids the thorny stalks of dried plants that litter the slope, ready to scratch the odd foot that steps on them. At moments like this, Belly is delirious. Driven by the whim of the moment, she is exultant—as if she is all upside-down and walking on her head.

Her brown tangled hair shines in the heat. Stringy locks stand up in untidy clumps, like palm fibre that hangs loose from nuts whose flesh has been squeezed dry by marauding bees. As she runs, a thick knot of unbraided hair rises and falls, keeping pace with her happy frenzy. Shortie chases after her. But he has no intention of catching up. He keeps a safe distance between her and him.

Belly is the first to climb down the mud bank and into the lakebed. The lakebed is a long, low tailpiece of land that twists away from the slope and field. It is thick with broad-branched tall trees, entwined with creepers that snake up and across branches. Through the hidden green of aavaaram bushes and aloe plants runs a waterway, curving its way ahead like a snake. The land beneath seems a dark secret, jealously guarded and protected by trees, bushes and snakes. There is almost no path but for the odd footprint that has left its mark on the crushed grass.

Shortie is not far behind but he can barely see Belly. Has the lakebed opened its mouth wide and swallowed her? He stands by a group of palms and calls out her name loudly. Unable to pierce through the dense green, his voice limps back to him. The air is still. Shocked into quiet, short trees, home to the garden lizard and chameleon, snake and rabbit, stand frozen to the ground. Nothing moves. Shortie does not want to go on. He moves to another group of palm trees and calls out Belly's name again. She must have slipped through the several lines of tall palm that stand spirit-like

and in a dark knot all along the bed. He runs in and out of the lines of palm, calling her name. He looks to see if he can spot a shape moving.

The quiet is shattered by the sound of an old palm frond scrapping against the trunk of an ageing tree. Shortie wonders if he should get back and tell Tallfellow and Stonedeaf that he has lost Belly.

"Aiyaaaa..."

A loud yell hits at him from behind.

"Aiyooo!"

A meaningless but terror-ridden sound escapes his lips in response. Then a clap of laughter slams down the back of his head. He turns around slowly and finds Belly behind him. She laughs demonically, like a spirit-child. He looks ashamed and refuses to look her in the face. She continues to laugh, a long, proud laugh. He picks up a stick from the ground and tries to hit her with it. She starts running, picking her way through bushes of thorn and nettle. He follows her, not minding the movement in the bushes, not looking this way or that.

Belly climbs up the slope on the far end of the lakebed and slides down into the field on the other side. She is quiet now, as she looks around carefully. Shortie realises that she is looking to see if the old woman who is constantly on the prowl in Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's fields is anywhere around. Clad in a piece of white cloth that reaches from her neck to her lower limbs, the old one is always out in the open, picking firewood, snapping berries off bushes. Though half-blind, her eyes are alert to movement and her ears are still sharp. If she hears the tiniest of sounds, she screeches.

"Tuui... tuuui..."

And if she thinks she has spied a stranger on the field, she raises a loud alarm that resounds across several fields.

No one dares trespass Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's fields because of her. Even on days dead-white with heat, she hobbles along, retiring for a brief while into a short shade.

"You go this way. I'll go the other."

Belly instructs Shortie and starts to make her way to her side of the field that until recently was sown over with peanuts.

Tall sharp stalks crowd the outfield. Some of them still show a bit of green, but a sad, mangled green. Ashwini insects swarm all over the dried stalks. The paste from their bodies is on the stalks, making them sticky. Shortie dislikes the feel of the paste, but nevertheless, bends down and feels about for a strong dry stalk.

From where he stands now, he sees the field stretching out on all sides. No sign of the old woman. She must have gone to sleep in this heat. He does not hear the bleat of goats either. Tired of waiting to be let out, they have probably gone to sleep too, hungry and exhausted. He sees Belly waving to him. Her black lips part to reveal a victory smile.

He breaks a stalk off the ground and strips its broken end to a fine thorny point. He drives the sharp end into the soil. It pierces the dusty top layer and goes in nicely. Then he starts to furrow the earth. After a while, the peanuts start popping up. He gathers them in his towel. Belly does the same on the other side of the field. He hears her go 'praak... praaaak...'.

It had rained at the time of the peanut harvest and ruined the crop. The tender peanut stalks turned rotten in the unexpected rain. As a result, the nuts fell off the stalks and remained buried in the earth. In a few days' time, the Gounder's workers will comb the field for the fallen nuts. If they knew we were here digging for nuts, they will beat the hell out of us, skin us alive and pickle our backs, thinks Shortie.

He has a large pile of nuts now and does not want to get caught. He fears the least noise. Even a dry leaf falling startles him. It is hard digging in the swampy parts, but these hold the largest number of nuts. Like little buds, they appear shining and full, asking to be picked. Some have been eaten away by insects and look like balls of netting. He puts them all together in his towel and makes a bundle of his booty. A good, sizeable bundle, as big as a palm-nut.

There is dirt inside his nails. He does not like it when he has to run his fingers through the turned earth and look for nuts. His makeshift hoe is less sharp now and does not slide into the soil easily. He clears his throat. Belly answers him with a similar clearing of hers. They meet at the point where the field rises to a slope, leading to the mud bank. Like him, she has a large bundle. Their eyes sparkle through the grime on their faces.

Belly runs up and then down the slope, screeching like a mynah. The narrow sandy waterway that streaks through the aavaaram bushes in the lakebed is hot. Belly and Shortie run in and out of the path. She stops at a spot by a neem tree, shrouded by thick creepers that gird the neem's branches, forming a natural curtain against the sun. Here the sand is soft and cool. She sits down. Sunbirds and sparrows call out from the bushes.

Shortie frowns. Why sit in a spot that is the cobra's haunt? Hadn't Stumpleg told them that he once saw a cobra and rat snake copulating at that very place? Show-off! Thinks she's great.

"Dai! Sit down. We'll go slowly."

Saying this, she opens her bundle, shells the nuts and starts popping them into her mouth. He sits down reluctantly. Two odd animals in the deep of the lakebed, he thinks. The sand is soft on his bottom. She hands him a few nuts. The fully ripe ones are crunchy and juicy. He chews

them with relish. They eat half the nuts in her pack and then stop. She gathers the rest up and ties them back into a tight bundle.

"For home. I'll leave them by the twin palm and pick them up later. Ma will squeeze the juice from these and make a chutney. For tomorrow..."

She likes to take things home. Not that she takes it to her home as such. She shares it with whoever wants them. Besides, she needs to chomp on something or the other all the time. They would have to share his bundle with Stonedeaf and Tallfellow. He looks at her, lying easily in the sand, her legs stretched out. She is like this whenever they do things together. A queen whose orders must be followed. He is suddenly irritated.

"I'm going."

She looks him up and down but does not reply.

"You come when you want to. I'm off."

Five

Tallfellow runs from a distance and then dives into the well. Countless drops of water splash up and against the well's walls and rebound into it. The water chortles and gurgles like the boiling palm juice they stir in huge pots to make sugar. A few seconds later, Tallfellow's head bobs up.

With a loud shriek, Belly somersaults into the water. By the time she gets her head up her body has turned full circle and gone over to the other side of the well. It is Shortie's turn next. He never jumps first. He waits for someone to get in and disturb the calm waters before he takes his plunge. Stonedeaf is not sure whether she should get in or not. She stands at the well's rim and peeps in from time to time. Seeing the others frisk and play and send the water into a raucous wailing and moaning, she badly wants to dive in.

Her eyes wander anxiously to the shade of the neem where the child sleeps. What if he wakes up? If he only screams and cries but remains in the shade, she need not worry. She can jump into the well and swim too. But what if the baby crawls to the well and looks for her? Peeps in and tumbles down deep?

She looks at the sky. The sun pours heat steadily on her head. If she gets into the water, her body will thank her for it. To feel the water lap around her, to paddle in it till her eyes turn red and the skin gathers wrinkles, to remain in the well till the sun climbs down and the heat loosens its hold on the air—the heart never tires of the water. She can remain in it till sundown, when the goats asleep in the shade finally shake their drowsiness off and amble towards the grass for their evening feed.

Stonedeaf feels sudden anger towards her Mistress. Why

bring a child into the world if she can't look after it? If she was not strong enough why did she get pregnant in the first place? As if someone forced her! Well, maybe she was forced. If she refused to get pregnant, the Gounder would have made a second marriage. That was for sure. But why should I suffer therefore, Stonedeaf asks herself indignantly. Maybe she should lie on that burning rock and fry to death in the heat. Grab that child that never leaves her side off the ground and fling him high, up towards the tallest coconut palm.

She goes to the child. He is sleeping on his side. She turns him over and makes him sleep on his back. His neck is beaded with sweat. She fans his neck and stomach. The child looks peaceful and bright in his slumber. Stonedeaf feels ashamed of her earlier thought—how could she have wanted to throw this child away? She presses her lips to his cheeks and forehead. She remembers how, sometimes, even when his mother is around, the child asks for her, demands to be petted by her. Her heart melts at the memory.

She gets up after a while and goes to the well. The centre of the well is empty. The others are at the sides, holding on to the walls for support. She jumps straight in. It is a deep well. Its mud walls have crumbled over the years and now the mud sits at the bottom in a huge untidy swamp. There are large crevices and a few rocks below and it is not safe to swim or dive deep. Not that anyone has dared to go all the way down. No one knows what lies there and very few that have gone down have come up to tell the tale. Everyone is happy to stay on the surface and chase each other round and round.

The well stands on land that was once a broad stream. Its sand is river-sand, white as lime. This is why the water appears murky. It is not easy to swim in these waters. The sludge blurs your vision and often a swimmer cannot see who is on the other side.

Two generations ago the well helped to water several acres of land. The family on whose land the well stood quarrelled amongst themselves. A small enough fight but as kin fought kin the wooden water-holders attached to the well were broken. Since then the fight has been resolved but the well remains unused and the land next to it untilled. The coconut trees on the land have long died for want of water and the land itself has turned completely barren. The quarrelling kin farm elsewhere and have not returned here. And since then, there has been no one to return the land to life.

Over the years, as happens, the well got silted up and became useless. A solitary coconut palm stands testimony to its former vitality. The palm refuses to die and holds onto its green fiercely. The well is now the haunt of the goat herding children. In high summer the lake runs dry and they turn to the well for relief.

Stonedeaf swims for a while and then comes up to see if the child is alright. She stands by the child for a full minute and jumps in again. She does this several times. The child affords her an excuse to get in and out of the well. As she comes up yet again, Tallfellow follows her. His eyes fasten on her back. Her clothes stick to her body like a second skin.

As she jumps back in, he jumps alongside her, just so his body brushes hers as they go down together. His knee jabs her back. Shocked, she gasps for breath. Her back feels hot with pain and her head throbs.

It is a while before she comes up. She splutters and struggles to breathe. She flails her hands about, searches for something to hold on to, opens her mouth out wide like a frog, and sucks in air greedily. Her fingers find a jutting stone. Gripping it tight, she stands up from the water, panting and bruised. She finds it hard to straighten her back, feels a great weight on it. Tallfellow is a little away from her.

He beats the water with his hands and watches it scatter into a million drops. His happy play irritates her.

"Why... why jump on me like that?"

Angrily, she manages a few broken words.

"On you? It was you who jumped when I did."

Tallfellow is nonchalant and swims away from her. Shortie and Belly are engaged in a swimming competition, trying to get past each other from one side of the well to the other. They are absorbed in their play and oblivious to everything else. Stonedeaf climbs back to the shore. The steps leading to the top are moss-ridden and slippery. They are brittle and can give way easily. One false step and down, down, down, one goes tumbling in to the well again. Stonedeaf goes to the sleeping child. Tallfellow follows her, drawn by her small breasts that stick out of her body like young palm nuts.

Stonedeaf gets ready to jump in again. Tallfellow joins her.

"You go first." She says. "I'll take my time."

He shakes his head. Then, in a hesitant, affectionate tone:

"Here, hold my hand and we'll jump in together."

"No! First you, then me."

Her back is still smarting and she is very annoyed with him. Her annoyance kindles his anger.

"If Stumpleg asks you to jump with him, you will, won't you? But not with me?"

"Get lost!"

She makes a face and moves away. He puts his hands out and grabs her by her shoulders.

"Will you jump with me or not?"

"Let go."

"Only once. I won't ask you again."

"Let go. I won't jump with you."

She walks away from the well and down to the shade of the coconut palm. Her blackened silver nose-ring flashes dully in the white light of the afternoon sun. Her hair is a flat black cap on her head. Drops of water cling to it. Her wet clothes make her squirm. She wants to dry herself. Tallfellow stands looking down at her from the steps of the well. His dripping loincloth hangs low on his hips, with its tail touching his shins.

"Look, if you don't come I'll..."

"Dai! I won't come. And that's that."

"Come. Just once. If you do, I'll bring you two coconuts tomorrow."

"I don't want them. Leave me alone!"

Her refusal makes him more obstinate. He wags his forefinger at her threateningly.

"I'll tell your Mistress how you left the child by the well and jumped in. You just wait!"

"Snitch! Do your worst!"

Stonedeaf does not want to go back to the well. She walks towards her goats. How dare he threaten her? She stops and looks back at the well and sees him dive in. What a relief! What had got into him? If he had his way, he would have dragged her to the well and forced her to jump! What madness! But thankfully he had not gone that far. Thinking of him beseeching her, Stonedeaf feels her heart go soft. She looks wistfully in the direction of the well: the sound of water slapping against the walls, muffled voices chasing each other excitedly. Should she have gone with him?

It is a long time before they emerge. Stonedeaf is now completely dry and feels hunger pull at her insides. The

child is still asleep. She should get her lunch pail. She has hidden it between two huge stones that lie hidden in a line of huddled aloe plants. Her pail does not have a proper lid, and if she hangs it on a tree, crows are sure to tweak the lid open with their beaks and feast on her meal. Which is why she is forced to hide it where she does.

She gets her pail and walks up to the mound of the well.

"I'm hungry. I'm going to drink my kanji now. Come along if you want to eat."

She sits under a tree and waits for them. Belly is the first to come out. She runs into the field, goes behind a palm and takes off her hip cloth. She wrings it dry and wraps it round herself. She picks up her pail and comes back to where Stonedeaf and the others sit in a circle, with all their pails open in the centre. Once the lids are off, the smell of fermented kanji hits the air. Shortie has his kambu ball. Tallfellow and Belly have millet balls soaked in water in theirs, and Stonedeaf, rice and lentils. They look eagerly into Stonedeaf's pail. She hands them each a handful of dripping rice.

Tallfellow has his head down and is busy breaking his millet balls into the water. He does not once look Stonedeaf in the eye. She raps him on the hand. He accepts her offering, but still does not look up. A small smile flits across Stonedeaf's face. Belly and Shortie turn to her with enquiring eyes. She grimaces and says nothing. She starts eating her rice and lentils.

God knows when her Gounder Mistress cooked the rice and lentils. The rice has gone soggy but the lentils cooked with tomatoes and garlic make it bearable, even tasty. All of them eat up their rice and look at her imploringly. Will she put her hand out again and give them another helping? Stonedeaf hands out another round of rice.

Just then Poochi the dog comes running. Dusty and

thirsty, it stands, with its panting tongue out.

"Dai Poochi! Where did you go? Looked for you in the morning!"

Shortie calls the dog to him and pats it on the forehead. Tail wagging and eyes half-closed it stands there, wanting him to keep running his hand along its back. He gets up, runs to a clump of palm thorns and brings out a palm bowl.

Kandamoopan, the toddy-tapper makes these palm bowls for the gounders. They drink toddy from them and then throw them into a nearby clump of palm thorn. He has to make them new ones for the next day. The goatherding children are sometimes given fresh palm juice in the used bowls. If one of them asks him for a new bowl, Kandamoopan laughs.

"Ho-ho! So you won't use a bowl used by a gounder! My, aren't you a little brahmin!"

If he is in a bad mood, he yells. "Bloody chakkili layabout! I offer you rice and you want butter with it!"

Seeing Shortie return with a bowl, Poochi runs to him and licks his feet. He shoos it away, then fills the bowl with some of his kanji. He moves away and the dog returns to the bowl. Its tongue slaps at the kanji noisily. A few gulps and the bowl is clean. Poochi comes back to Shortie, tail wagging.

"Enough. That's all for now. Tonight when you guard the goat pen, I'll ask the Mistress for more."

Shortie coos to the dog but it refuses to go away.

"Go, Poochi. Out!"

Shortie raises his voice.

"Poor thing. Let it be, Shortie!"

Tallfellow gets up and pours some of his food into the bowl. Stonedeaf takes a bit of kanji from everyone else. Belly has two red chillies with her and she passes them around. One small bite sets the stomach on fire. After that, it is easy

to get the cool kanji down fast. Even so, the taste of chilli lingers. Shortie's kambu ball is soft and crumbly and goes down well. Tallfellow stands and stretches his hands up until his stomach pushes out. The others laugh seeing his belly protrude. Shortie feels his loincloth chafe and decides to change it. He retreats to a shade and takes it off. He pulls his towel off his head and wraps it round his hips. He washes the loincloth by the well and ties it on his head. It should dry soon.

Stomachs full, they are ready to sleep. Shortie finds himself a stone-pillow and lies down. The others choose their bit of shade and soon, like their goats, they lie huddled and drowsy under trees and tall bushes. The goats chew on. Shortie nods off.

A goat's sad and continuous bleat stirs him awake. Has he slept for long? He does not want to open his eyes. The bleat chases him in his half-sleep. It is an unhappy, long bleat, almost a cry of loss. He knows how each goat sounds and goes over their various bleats in his head. Mollachi! Yes, that was Mollachi. Mollachi, the she-goat who only recently delivered a kid. Her anxious and nurturing bleat is familiar to him. He opens his eyes and sees Mollachi nuzzling the rest of the herd. He sees her go in and out of the shade of trees and bushes where the goats lie, chewing and snorting. She sniffs at their sides, stops, then goes up the mud bank and bleats at the lakebed. Loudly at first, then softly. The rest of the herd remains calm and continues to chew placidly. Mollachi is now beside herself and goes round and round the field.

Shortie snaps into attention. Her kid, she is missing her kid! He calls out to Mollachi.

"Baa... baa... raa... raaa..."

She comes running to him and smells his hand. Not smelling the kid on him, she moves away and continues to

bleat. Where is the damned kid? Why does it not return its mother's call? Shortie is now on his feet and starts searching. He bends and looks into every shady nook he can find. No sign of the kid. Mollachi has not missed it all along, but now perhaps she is ready to feed and, not finding the kid, has panicked.

Shortie is not too worried. It must be around here, lying, maybe in a secret shade, next to one of the goats. It does not know how anxious its mother is. He continues to search—under the palm, the neem, in the shade of the aavaaram bushes.

"Baa... drrr... baa.... drrr... eeyooo..."

The older goats think he is calling them and come to him. Still no sign of the kid. It is a real baby, barely three days old and has not begun to step outside the ring of its mother's feet. The mother too never lets it stray and keeps a close protective watch on it. What could have happened?

Seven-sister sparrows send out a volley of screeches from the lakebed. They must have spied a snake. The kid could not have gone very far. Its feet are still not firm on the ground and slide and buckle when it tries to keep pace with its mother. It is almost milk-white, except for a fleck of brown—as if someone has teasingly splattered it with a few dots of mud. The Gounder was thrilled when Mollachi gave birth to a female. After Mollachi's time, they would be assured of milk. Mollachi herself is no mean milk-giver and is always generous in her yield.

The others are up now, jolted out of their sleep by the goat's bleating and Shortie calling to the kid. The child is wide awake too. His eyes look round and ready to pop out. He sits firmly on Stonedeaf's lap, drinking from his milk-pot. Shortie is now very afraid and close to weeping. The others join him in searching. As they fan out into the field, some of the goats run after them confusedly. They are not

sure what is wrong and there is terror in their eyes.

"Where the hell did it go? Think a fox got it or something?" Tallfellow wonders.

No one knows. They have been told of foxes haunting the lakebed, but none of them have yet lost a kid to a fox. They have heard stories of how a fox pounces on a kid, how it goes straight for the throat and how therefore the kid cannot even bleat out its fear and call for help. It appears that the fox waits and watches and comes at a kid when it least expects to be attacked and drags it away. But could a kid have gone so far into the bed? And besides, do foxes attack in the morning, with the sun so bright and hot?

Perhaps a dog attacked it. Dogs are known to kill goats and kids. But usually no dog comes into the fields, except Poochi. Even if one had come today, Poochi would have barked and not allowed the intruder in. And Poochi has not barked even once in the afternoon.

They have searched everywhere—behind stones, in holes, in faraway tree shades. The palm trees stand as they have always stood, straight and silent, only they are a little wilted in the day's heat. Panic grips Shortie's stomach. His face burns with worry. Belly tries to console him.

"Sure you led it out this morning? Maybe it's still in the goat shed..."

He shakes his head. If he had forgotten, the mother would have known and set up her bleating cry a long time ago. The mother would never have moved out without the kid. Shortie sits down and starts howling. Sobs wrack his thin body, as he imagines the scene that awaits him in the evening. What can he tell the Gounder?

He sees the Gounder come towards him, curling his lower lip. What will it be? The whip or a strong stick? The Gounder holds him by his ears and shakes him till it feels as if his

body will drop away from his face. "What the fuck were you doing? Where's the kid?"

What can he say? He will not be able to speak, get the words out.

Shortie buries his head in his knees. Belly's white he-goat comes to him and nuzzles his head. He looks up and sees the goat's head close to his. A drawn and pinched goat-face, with red eyes. The goat tugs at Shortie's hair with his mouth, as if it was a bunch of leaves. Shortie's stomach collapses into itself and he pisses in his loincloth.

The others continue to search. Belly is hopeful that the kid will be found. It must have fallen asleep in a patch of shade to escape the heat. It is sure to come out when it gets hungry.

They rummage through a huge clump of palm thorn that sits squarely on the field—like a woman with many hands who squats on the ground, her sari tucked under her. Child on hip, Stonedeaf pokes into the thorn and turns over dried palm sheaths with a long twig. A startled field rat jumps out. Stonedeaf bends down and finds a rat's hollow.

A milk-white kid lies snugly asleep in it.

"Shortie! Aiy Shortie!"

Stonedeaf raises her voice in a happy shout.

Six

The entire field is now captive to Stumpleg. Not just the field, but the time of day as well. Like a swarm of bees that suddenly descends on a plot of land, his goats are everywhere, nuzzling the ground in large groups. He brings the largest number of goats—even added up, the others' goats are fewer than his. His Gounder has one of the biggest goat pens in the neighbourhood.

Stumpleg knows each of his goats by name. If a goat goes missing, he knows at once which one it is. When he takes them home at dusk, he counts their number patiently, calling out to a straying goat or kid to stay in line with the rest. Shortie thinks that all other goats are lost once Stumpleg's herd comes along. They mingle and cannot find their way out of that forest of goat legs.

Stumpleg comes in with a loud "ho-ho", marshalling his herd into the field. After they scatter and begin to feed, he walks to where the others are. Seeing him, they hurriedly stand up to greet him. Only Stonedeaf remains seated with the child on her lap. He does not scold her if she does not get up.

They are all now under the shade of the paalai tree. It is in bloom, covered almost completely with white flowers. Dead and half-dead white flowers carpet the shade underneath and give out a delicate fragrance. Nestling in the tree's roots is the god, Karupannasami, carved out of a single black stone that stands upright on a mound of sand. A little away from the god is a faded, sad-looking lamp-holder. Inside it are two mud lamps from very long ago. The oil of the lamps has since dried up and left behind a circle of black grime, now caked up and crumbling. Dried mauve-

coloured flowers, once somebody's offerings, lie strewn about the mound of sand.

Stonedeaf is closest to Karupannasami, she sits at his feet. Stumpleg walks haltingly, leaning on his good leg, making it bear his weight. A large loincloth flaps about his thighs, reaching almost to his knees. Its tail hangs behind him, slapping against the back of his legs. He pulls off the towel on his head and lays it on the mound of sand. Holding on to the trident planted in front of the god, he sits down on his towel and sighs. He bends, pulls up the tail of his loincloth and wipes the sweat off his face. Tallfellow sits in front on him. Belly and Shortie get back to their game of five stones. They don't have to worry about Stumpleg anymore.

Tallfellow is quiet when Stumpleg is around. At other times, he constantly scolds him, talks ill of him. When he sees him, though, Tallfellow is servility itself, ready to do whatever Stumpleg wants him to do.

"Why so long, brother?"

"Pcchh..."

Stumpleg winces and shakes his head.

"Couldn't get away. Early morning I drove the old Gounder in his cart to Sandaipettai. Picked up loads of shit from the toilets there, dumped the lot, came back. Another trip like that—on contract, you know. Then two trips to Tiruchengode, first sand, then stones for someone building a house. I am exhausted. Even the oxen are tired, going up and down. Came back to the Gounder's house and already the sun is high in the sky. Drank my kanji and let the goats out. Took them to the peanut haystack, let them feed a bit, then brought them here."

This is his routine. He is always tired when he comes. Shortie decides to change the subject.

"Brother, what picture is showing at Krishna Talkies?"

"Karpagam. A silly film. Gemini Ganesan and K.R. Vijaya act in it. Who wants to see it?"

Stumpleg goes to Tiruchengode town at least four times a week. He is a man of the world and the others love to ask him things. But they cannot get too cozy with him and expect him to reward them with answers always. His hands are strong and rough, used to wielding the spade and the scythe. When he is angry, he uses them to draw blood from a hapless cheek. Stumpleg does not care that others might think him a bully. Nor does he feel sorry for anyone he beats up.

The child lies on his back against Stonedeaf's stretched legs. He looks up and smiles at Stumpleg who stretches his hands to the baby. But the baby turns away from him and buries his face against Stonedeaf's legs. Stumpleg does not give up. He coos to the child. Then, remembering something, he turns to Tallfellow.

"See that short palm this side of the lakebed? If you look carefully you'll find a palm bundle hidden in the sheaths there. I've put got some tender cucumbers in it. Bring it here."

Tallfellow agrees, but with a sullen face. He asks Shortie to go with him. Absorbed in his game, Shortie refuses. Tallfellow sets off, muttering to himself.

"Bastard Stumpleg! Came up that way, didn't he? Why couldn't he have got it himself? Comes, sits down and orders everyone around! Must have left it there on purpose so he can command me to go get it for him."

Cursing Stumpleg, he walks in the direction of the palm, his feet kicking spitefully at the stalks that line the harvested tracts

"What's that I hear?"

Stumpleg sounds menacing. Tallfellow turns and flashes a smile at him.

"Nothing!"

It is late afternoon and the sun is less harsh. The goats move about quietly feeding. They are not as restless as they were earlier in the day and keep together. Tallfellow strikes a path through a thick herd of goats and starts running towards the lakebed.

"Bruuuu... chhh..."

He yells and the goats scatter, dismayed at the tall figure that cuts through their feeding ground. Ears on the alert, they stare at him. Once he goes past them, they return to their grazing.

The short palm is as tall as a human person. It is covered with leaves from top to bottom. Where can Stumpleg's bundle be? Which side and how high? Tallfellow circles the tree. The palm leaves are densely together and it is dark inside. Tallfellow peers about the leaves but does not find anything.

"Motherfucker! Where's he hidden the stuff?"

He shakes the lower leaves and hears something slither up the tree trunk. Scared, he moves away and stares at the tree from a distance. A garden lizard, head cocked on one side, lies panting on top of a leaf. A sunbird flies out, surprised by the sudden rustling. There are probably snakes in here. He ruffles the outer leaves. No use. He pulls at a dried leaf and hears something drop down. Surprised, he jumps back and examines the thing from a distance. A green bundle woven out of palm fronds.

If Stumpleg has hidden his cucumbers away so safely, there must be something to it. If he had gathered them on his way to the field, he would have brought them with him. Perhaps he had put them away without his Gounder's knowledge. Maybe he came here last night. Tallfellow feels a burst of affection for Stumpleg. The soft green of the cucumbers shows through the woven palm rushes. Tender cucumbers, fresh and crunchy. He wants to open the basket and eat one. But Stumpleg will know if he does that and

kick him sharp and hard with his lame leg. God! Even his bad leg was strong and a well-delivered kick can peel your skin off. The bundle is heavy. There must be at least ten cucumbers inside. If the old woman who roams Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's fields had seen this loot, she would have raised hell.

He runs, basket in hand.

"Ho! Ho!"

His excited loud call scares a crow off a goat's back. It flies away screaming. His cry echoes across the fields and dissolves into the vast sky. His feet do not feel the heat of the rough stones on the way. Maybe because the day is veering towards the cool of the evening. Or maybe the thought of the cucumbers drives him on fast to the others. His loincloth hanging loose, he arrives panting, and flings himself on the sandy mound where Karupannasami sits waiting.

Stumpleg looks up from the bottom of the mound, where he sits at Stonedeaf's feet, cuddling the baby.

"What?"

Tallfellow's excitement irritates him.

"Here it is, brother!"

Tallfellow quiets his flaming breath and hands him the bundle. Belly and Shortie stop their game and return to the group. Stumpleg holds the bundle carefully. He singles out a loose strand of frond, pulls at it and the bundle opens. But not fully. Just a little, just enough for him to slide his hand in. He pulls out a cucumber and gives it to Tallfellow. A rippling green cucumber as long as the palm of his hand. Belly and Shortie get a cucumber each. Tallfellow looks expectantly at Stumpleg's face. Won't he give him one more?

"Here, Pet."

Stumpleg hands a tiny cucumber to the baby. His tone is tender. Stonedeaf laughs softly, feeling her cheeks go warm.

Has Stumpleg forgotten that the others were there? Tallfellow cradles the cucumber in his hand and looks at Shortie. Shortie looks at Belly. In spite of themselves, they grin. Stumpleg hears Shortie splutter.

"Dai! What're you laughing at?"

"Nothing, brother."

Shortie tries to look blank but does not succeed in wiping the smile off his face

"I said, why that laugh?"

Still unable to hold himself in check but now afraid of not doing so, Shortie mumbles, "Nothing, brother."

Tallfellow and Belly hold themselves back and look studiedly glum. Stumpleg's anger is now almost entirely directed at Shortie.

"Dai! I asked you a question!"

Shortie looks ready to cry. Unsmiling and afraid he repeats: "Nothing, brother!"

Stumpleg grunts. He appears glad that there is not even a shadow of a smile on Shortie's face.

"Mmmm..."

Stumpleg's tone is grim and he shakes his head doubtfully.

Stonedeaf suddenly laughs, amused at the sad threesome. Tallfellow looks at her and catches her eye. That laugh is meant for him. He is sure of that. A derisive laugh to make him feel bad. Will she tell Stumpleg about how he wanted her to jump into the well with him? If Stumpleg hears of it, he would beat him up, why, he might even tear Karuppannasami's trident off the ground and stab him with it!

"Karuppa, save me, make Stonedeaf not tell Stumpleg about me. This one time, Karuppa, save me, save me, please." Tallfellow mumbles to himself, as he has seen Stumpleg do,

when he chants one of his weird magic verses.

"Aiy Belly! Run off now. Go to that raised bank over there, where the Kooli Kaattu field starts on the far side of the mud bank."

Stumpleg orders Belly. Alone? Won't one of the others go with her? She stands up hesitantly, obviously unwilling to go. He looks at her, frowning.

"Hmm..."

At that, Belly takes off, and starts running. She will not stop until she reaches the tall stretch of land that has been raised as a boundary wall between their field and the Kooli Kaattu field. Stumpleg turns to the others.

"You two go the lakebed side, to that end of the mud bank."

Tallfellow and Shortie move away. Tallfellow is especially reluctant, not wanting to leave Stumpleg and the cucumbers. There must be at least five cucumbers left. He will probably give them all to Stonedeaf. He could have given him one more for his troubles. Just one, for running to the short palm and fetching them. Stonedeaf! How she laughed seeing him tongue-tied before Stumpleg

"That Stumpleg! Dai, I want to break his good leg off. Let's see how he walks then!"

Shortie inwardly agrees but decides it is best to be cautious.

"Careful! Stumpleg can do magic. He can..."

"Him? Magic? Holds up a neem twig in one hand and his towel in the other and chants nonsense. What's so magical about that?"

But Stumpleg can do magic. If a goat gets drowsy after eating poisonous leaves and berries, he knows how to cure it. If a thorn pierces someone's foot, he knows a chant to get it out. He has chants and spells for almost everything—

even the spidery sore that sometimes appears on one's arse. Whenever he casts or removes a spell, he becomes very quiet. Now and then he asks a few brief questions to clarify the facts of the case, but that is all. If a neem tree happens to be near him, he breaks off bunches of neem leaves. If not, he takes the towel off his head and twists its ends into a rope.

He uses the neem leaf or the tail of his towel as a feathery wand, which he runs over the sick creature, animal or human, while his mouth continues chanting. If the creature is a man, he runs the wand over his head, if a goat, his wand traces a pattern in the empty air around. At these times, Stumpleg's face is as tight as a mask and strangely luminous. His eyes appear glazed and stare emptily into the distance. After he finishes chanting, he turns east, and raises his hands in prayer to the Tiruchengode hill.

Even the gounders ask him to help with illness and ill luck. He is often called to treat children. Whenever a child is brought to him, the mother usually brings along a bunch of neem leaves for him to use while he chants.

Once a Gounder woman from Kootupalli village asked him to cure her child. She looked around but there was no neem tree nearby. Stumpleg took his towel off his head twisted its ends into a rope and, with his eyes closed, started to work on the child. The rope went over the child's head several times. The Gounder woman tried to hold the child's head down so that Stumpleg's towel went over but did not touch the head.

Stumpleg knew when his rope went over the child's head and when it did not. He would open his eyes from time to time and see the woman holding the child away and down, so that his towel ends did not graze the child's skin. When he was done, the Gounder woman said in a remorse-filled tone:

"They told me to take neem leaves along. I forgot and..."

"Madam Gounder, only if the wand touches the child's head will he be alright."

"I will bring neem leaves tomorrow."

So, she did not want his towel to touch her child's head. When the Gounder woman came the next day, Stumpleg told her firmly:

"For this child, I have to use my towel. Otherwise my chants won't work."

His magic produces results. Of that everyone is convinced. After he has worked his spell, a thorn-bitten foot does heal the next day—the thorn drops off on its own. Everyone continues to be surprised at his powers. Who taught him these spells and chants? When he is asked, Stumpleg often smiles, an odd, wry smile. A mysterious twist of the mouth. Pressed for details, he gazes at the sky silently and, after a while, tells his listener of what happened to him one day.

It was the month of June. Summer was almost over, yet it was hot. Goats grazing the outfield had a tough time, trying to nibble off the dry earth. The field was as wide and red as it is now.

At that time, Stumpleg was very young, around ten or eleven years old. It was a day like any other. The sun had dipped down in the west. The time before the twilight hour. He was alone in the field with his goats. But he was not afraid. Even when he was small, he was hard to scare. He had a quick tongue that talked back easily. Standing on the mud bank he looked at he goats, wondering if they were done. Had they fed enough? If their stomachs sagged even a bit, the Gounder would notice and scold him.

He felt a sudden chill in the air. A damp wind began to blow from the south, causing the heat to abandon and flee the earth. Big rain-filled clouds appeared from nowhere and

filled the evening sky—thick smudges of dark fleece, like fat black sheep. Even as he stood staring, the field darkened. This happened often at this time of the year, this grand coming of the clouds. They never stayed though, and moved away very soon in another direction. He looked at them without any particular feeling or thought. Yet a shiver ran down his spine.

Plop! A raindrop. Plop-plop! Some more and then the rain came down in huge dense drops. Stumpleg knew immediately that the clouds had come to stay for a while. Soon, the sky would pour down torrents. He would not be able to drive his goats back to the farm pen. He must wait for the rain to stop. The goats would take care of themselves, flock under a tree and, as they often did when they are afraid, go into a knot of horns and legs. He did not fear the rain. He wanted to get wet, cool his hot body down.

There was no one for miles around. An empty field. The evening was quiet, but for the rain. He could do anything and no one would know. Buoyed by the thought, he ripped off his loincloth and towel, stuffed them into a drinking bowl that Kandamoopan had left nestling face-down in a tree hollow by the twin palm.

He stood naked under the raining sky.

Soon puddles of water appeared on the dry red earth, until the lake was one large pond. Swollen with rain, the palm trees were dense black blotches against a blue-grey sky. The goats stood wet and shivering under the trees.

Stumpleg felt elated, as the rain coursed through his naked body. It whipped down on him, pounding his shoulders, massaging them. He bent down and took the pouring rain on his back. He straightened and raised his face to the sky. Then, threw his head back and let the water flow down his parched throat till the thirst he had felt all day dissolved. The rain washed out the layered dirt of his

body, streamed through and rinsed his hair. He felt light and cleansed.

But he did not stop. He rolled in the red mud, now wet and slippery, and let the rain wash the slush off him. He ran to the Big Rock, stood on top of it for a while, rolled down to the mud and stood up—asking the rain to clean him again. He was ecstatic, mud-splattered and with his face to the clouds. Exultant and joyous, he lost his words to the rain and could never sufficiently recall what he felt that evening.

After the rain stopped, the sky appeared washed into a soft white. The goats looked sparkling white too. An unbroken silence held earth and air. Delicate yellow light tinged the water-filled field, and held out a shy greeting to the retreating rain. The hastening twilight hour appeared like dawn, so fresh and clean everything was.

Stumpleg knew that the goats had to be taken in now. Their tongues would be loath to feed on the waterlogged grass and wet leaves. He jumped to life and briskly walked to the twin palm. He retrieved Kandamoopan's bowl and extricated his loincloth from it. He was dry now. He ran his towel through his hair and then tied it around his head. As he held the loincloth to his hips, he realised that he had been naked all along. Blood rushed to his face and he went warm. Embarrassed, he called the goats to him and got ready to walk to the farm. Just then, he saw a figure climbing down the mud bank.

Who could that be? At this hour of the day? A goat thief? Knowing he would be alone, had he come to attack him and carry away a goat or two? Stumpleg slipped behind a palm and watched the figure walk into the field—a man, clad in a hip-cloth, with a scarf flung across his shoulders and covering his neck. A long beard fell to his chest and his fierce eyes scanned the distance with confidence. An ascetic.

Why was he here? Where could he be going? He did not appear to be a begging ascetic. He looked strong, his wet black body was firm, lithe and shining. As if he had rubbed oil all over himself. The man had got wet in the rain and wrung his clothes dry before putting them on again.

Stumpleg stepped out of his hiding place and with folded hands greeted the holy man.

The ascetic looked at him in amazement. His eyes widened in wonder.

"Your clothes are dry?"

His voice sounded like that of a she-goat calling her mate. Stumpleg smiled but did not reply. The ascetic repeated his question. Stumpleg remained silent. How could he tell this man that he had put his clothes away because he wanted to stand naked under the rain? He felt his tongue stiffen and go rigid.

"No reason really..." He could barely speak.

The ascetic was not satisfied. Thinking that Stumpleg did not want to let him into a secret he said: "If you tell me how, I'll teach you chants and spells."

Stumpleg understood then that the ascetic thought he had some magic powers that helped him remain dry even in the rain.

"What'll you teach me?"

"Many things. A chant to bind spirits to you. If you learn it, certain spirits will be yours, to command and rule. Including the one that does twenty different things at the same time. Only thing, you must not look the creature in the eye. Close your eyes and keep on muttering this chant. The spirit will then wait to do your bidding."

"My bidding? What would I want it to do?"

"Help you. Help you with curing things that bother people—thorns which prick them, the spidery back-sore, the

evil eye, an ill-wind, body pain, nail-pain, swelling of the thumb, the malady-whose-name-must-not-be mentioned, fear and blanching, incurable sores, wasted limbs, vomiting, stomach pain, fever, headache... and things that affect animals: the drowsiness that comes over goats and cattle, swollen udders, neck-sores, watering eyes, cracks on the horns and feet, stomach-poison, bad fodder, the devils of the air—see, there are over twenty things the spirits can help you with."

"If I tell you how my clothes stayed dry, you'll teach me all this?"

"Of course. By the grace of the black Kali, who forever sits on my tongue and chants for me, I'll teach you. Believe me!"

Stumpleg was a bit abashed. He had no magic to show and wondered if the ascetic would feel cheated. In any case he decided to tell him the truth. He took him to the twin palm and showed him the drinking bowl that had kept his clothes dry. The ascetic did not appear disappointed. He placed his hand on Stumpleg's head, as if he were praising him for being so clever.

Stumpleg felt a blade of ice slice through his skull. That extraordinary coolness lasted only for a moment. The ascetic removed his hand and asked him to turn east and bow in prayer to the Tiruchengode hill. Stumpleg lay flat on his stomach on the red earth and raised his hands to the hill. Once more he was splattered with mud. He did not mind it. The ascetic muttered a chant. Stumpleg closed his eyes and repeated what he had heard. A second chant and then a third one and so on. Actually it was the same chant as the first, except that for each ailment a different word was added to the chant. He opened his eyes and looked around him. The ascetic stood with closed eyes, facing the Tiruchengode hill and praying.

"Close your eyes and repeat this chant to yourself. A hundred and eight times. Then we'll see if it works."

Stumpleg shut his eyes, held his hands together in prayer and started his chanting. Magical words rolled off his tongue clearly and effortlessly. His heart felt pure. When he was done, he opened his eyes. The goats were all about him. The ascetic had disappeared. Stumpleg looked this way and that. There was nobody.

"You believe Stumpleg's stories?"

"Don't know. Maybe it happened that way."

Tallfellow is annoyed that Shortie does not join him in reviling Stumpleg. They are near the mud bank. Down the slope, stands a thorny karuvelam tree, whose berries have fallen down in a yellow heap. Tallfellow slides down and starts picking them up, one by one. The goats like to eat them. Shortie follows him.

"You really think an ascetic came on a rainy evening and taught him magic? Bullshit. All bullshit. Look, we've hung around here all our lives and we've never seen an ascetic."

"So? It doesn't happen to all of us. You can stand here all your life, panting for it to happen, and nothing will. Everyone gets what they deserve."

Shortie laughs meaningfully. Tallfellow grimaces. His face flushes a deeper black. He grits his teeth and spits out words, wishing the air would carry them to Stumpleg.

"The chap's older than me. That's why I've kept quiet all this time. Otherwise, I would have kicked the shit out of his arse."

Shortie is afraid. The hard set of Tallfellow's face troubles him. So much hurt and hatred. I should be careful with him, he thinks. Why, he might do as he says, follow his willful heart. Feeling those angry, hate-filled eyes bore into his face,

Shortie looks away and busies himself gathering the yellow berries. Tallfellow is now done. He sits under the tree and continues his harangue.

"See how he's sent us all off in different directions? Why? So that he can coo and cuddle up to Stonedeaf. He's such a..."

Tallfellow stops and looks expectantly at Shortie, wanting him to egg him on. But Shortie remains silent. He is equally irritated by Stumpleg's high-handedness, his arrogance. But he does not think he can stand up to him. Also, he does not trust Tallfellow. What if he sneaks on him to Stumpleg? And he would too. He scolds Stumpleg when he is not around, but face to face with him, he dissolves into a chirping obedience.

"Shortie! You don't know the kind of things that fellow gets up to. If I told you, you'd cackle through your bloody asshole."

Shortie waits for the story. But Tallfellow is suddenly tongue-tied. Has he something shameful to say and does not want to say it?

"Even his Gounder found out and whipped him several times. But the chap hasn't learned anything."

"What did he do?"

Shortie is pleased that someone actually beat Stumpleg.

"It happened ten, fifteen days ago. Seems he'd just finished cleaning the toilets. The Gounder gave him his kanji and told him that he was done for the day on the farm and should take the goats out. They had penned the goats down this side of their farm, close to the field. Stumpleg was gone for a long time at the goat pen. What was he doing? Where were the goats? That Gounder of his is sharp, he knows Stumpleg well. He never lets him out of sight when he is on the farm..."

"That fucking Gounder! I know how he is..."

"But that man's tough, I'm telling you. He knows how to handle Stumpleg. Any other man, and that Stumpleg would have scraped the asshole off him by now."

"Go on!"

"Well, the Gounder was worried. Stumpleg had been gone a while. So he ran towards the pen and when he got there, he heard one of his goats bleating like mad. Guess what he saw? God!"

"What?"

"Dai! You just don't get it! Such a dolt! Have to hold a fucking lamp to it to make you understand! That Stumpleg had tied the goat to a corner, taken off his loincloth and... God! I can't say any more!"

Shortie wants to laugh, but he feels shy. His eyes go round and big.

"Really?"

"Think I'm lying? He does it all the time! Just got unlucky that day and the Gounder found out."

Shortie does not know what to say. He feels odd. He hurriedly scoops up the berries he has gathered into his towel and gets ready to go back to the mud bank.

"I'm off."

He turns away from the tree and starts walking. Tallfellow's loud laughter follows him.

"Dai! Why don't you do what Stumpleg did?"

"Fuck off!"

Shortie races up the slope.

Seven

Belly stands on the raised bank beyond which lie the Kooli Kaattu fields. Her eyes scan the horizon and alight on the small pond in the east, whose bed is overgrown with dark thorny trees. A hollow blackness, that looks as if a part of the earth has been gouged out from the darkness below. Belly knows that amidst the thorny trees are gherkin plants, whose intertwined leafy creepers form a thick canopy of green. She must take the goats there tomorrow.

Beyond the small pond bed is the Tiruchengode hill. It sits smug and confident and stares down at Belly. In the late afternoon sun the hill's red rocky sides appear sliced into strips of light and shade. The hill lets off an even glint.

It is never the same, muses Belly, the hill changes colour and shape from moment to moment. A temple stands on top of it, sticking out like a sharp nail that has outgrown its finger. If the nail grows a bit more, it will tear and rent the sky. And then? Belly looks away. Her eyes hurt from the light and everything appears hazy for a minute.

She sits down on the bank and looks at her flock. In the morning the goats are frisky. They gambol, jump and run about excitedly. But as afternoon turns to evening, they subside into silence and appear like dolls made out of beaten clay. Belly does not like these contented evening-goats, as she calls them. They don't need anyone to herd them. She has nothing to do, except sit and watch, her head tucked into her knees. At least if Tallfellow and Shortie were here, she would not mind the time of day so much. For then they would talk, laugh.

Bloody Stumpleg! Who does he think he is? He behaves as if the field is his own, when, in fact, they do not even

belong to his Gounder. His Gounder's fields are on the other side of the mud bank. These fields here belong to her Gounder household. And he sits there, cuddling Stonedeaf and feeding her cucumbers. Maybe I should go and tell him this, she thinks, feeling fierce inside. Ask him why he thinks it is his right to sit here and order everyone.

She picks up a stick and aims it at a goat that feeds on this side of the raised bank. The stick catches the animal on its side. Startled and pained, it lets out a loud complaining bleat and disappears into the herd. Must be one of Stumpleg's goats!

Belly stretches her arms and legs and chases languor out of her body. She looks around her once more. An erukkan plant catches her eye on the Kooli Kaattu side. It stands on a ledge, where two field ridges meet at a right angle. Its ash-white leaves appear to be so many hands holding up lamps to the sky. Clumps of flowers and hundreds of buds sit among the leaves like delicate wicks. How come I didn't see you, Plant? Belly mutters and runs towards the erukkan.

She starts to gather the blue-white flowers and leaves the buds alone. Hands full, she sits down and counts them. About thirty. She kicks at a furrow with her feet and stamps the flying dust vigorously till she has a large, circular hollow space. She leans back and starts throwing the flowers one by one into the hollow.

Some flowers sit erect on the ground, others fall on their sides. Yet others plummet face downwards, till their noses scrape the earth, and they lie vanquished and hurt. Belly picks up the flowers that stand straight and lays them aside. She has to somehow make them fall. The fallen flowers have to be made to stand up. She gathers them into another heap. And so she plays on till the brave are defeated and the timid raised from the earth and made to stand tall.

She is now left with one flower. She has to make it stand

up. She tries throwing it from different angles, at different speeds. No use. It falls flat all the time. As a last resort, she holds it by its delicate stalk and brings it down gently, hoping it will now stand. It does, but only for a split-second. Then it flops to the side. Belly is annoyed. Why must a single flower thwart her? Why does it have to fall flat? Perhaps it wants to, loves to fall. Perhaps it is afraid that she will cast it into the lot that has been made to stand erect. Stubborn flower. Scared flower. Belly picks up the star-shaped flower and sets it down viciously, making sure that its stalk is buried into the ground. It stands up, finally.

Belly sits down and claps her hands in merriment. Serves you right, Flower, serves your right. What'll you do now, eh, what'll you do. She gets up and as she does, several star-shaped flowers scatter into the ground from her lap.

Standing up, she sees Tallfellow and Shortie walking and running across the lakebed. They have gone down the mud bank again. They appear to be chasing each other. She must go there. Go and play a catching game with them. She runs down the bank and into the bed.

They see her and start running. They don't want her to catch them. She runs after them, determined to catch hold of one of them at least. And so the catching game begins, without anyone planning it. As they run through the lakebed, ducking trees and bushes, screaming and laughing, the feeding goats on the other side look up, their noses wet with snot. But for a very brief while, after which they return to their feed, as if bemused and indulgent of their herders. The ground is covered with dried leaves and grass and the goats, content with the world, have no use for the noise and gaiety that echo all around them.

At last Belly 'catches' Shortie. She chases him through a line of palm and finally holds him. She laughs in scornful delight. Tallfellow smirks, evidently proud that he was not

caught. They keep running though the game is over, till they are back at Karuppannasami's feet.

"Dai! What are you playing?"

It is Stumpleg.

"Running and Catching."

Tallfellow replies, not sure what this means.

"We'll play too. Come on, Deafy."

Now they have to start the game all over again. But this time, they do it like it is done normally. They stand in a circle, holding hands. Stonedeaf's little charge clings to her legs, unwilling to be parted from her. They fling their hands up and bring them palm-down. Palm up and down, up and down. The sound of their hands touching and scraping clutches the air like a flutter of pigeons' wings. They continue on, till Stumpleg gets it wrong and brings his palms down when all the others have theirs face-up. So he has to be the catcher. His face falls. But he does not protest. They have played by the rules and no one has cheated.

"Alright, I'll be the catcher. But we're playing Touch-and-go, not Running and Catching. Remember, you can't run just run anywhere. Only inside this plot, see?"

He spreads his hands out to demarcate a fairly small stretch of land.

"Run beyond this limit and you become the catcher."

The others are silent. They are not happy with this, but know they have no choice but to agree. Touch-and-go is not really a proper catching game. There is no fun in it, because of the tight rules. In a good catching game, everyone runs as far as they can and till they are caught. But Stumpleg always changes rules to suit himself. He cannot run very fast and his legs seldom carry him beyond the small area he has marked out.

Stumpleg drags his bad leg around hurriedly and runs after them. They run round and round the demarcated plot. Stonedeaf is the first to give up. She sits, weary with carrying the child and running. The others let her be and do not touch her and run. If they did, she would have to join the game again. Belly, Shortie and Tallfellow weave their way through each other's running paths, determined not to be caught by Stumpleg. Belly hops in and out of crevices and ledges like a sly bandicoot to keep out of Stumpleg's reach. She knows the art of running without tiring herself and is never breathless.

Stumpleg, though, is not looking out for her. He wants to get his hands onto one of the boys. Not for him a girl. He does not want to be told later that he touched Belly because he was not man enough to lay his hands on the boys. He lunges at her from time to time, but keeps his eyes trained on Shortie and Tallfellow. The two run together at a similar pace but when Stumpleg comes near them, they start running in different directions and stop at different points, as if daring him to go after one of them. Stumpleg starts after Shortie, but then swiftly changes track and charges at Belly. Belly jumps out of his way and starts running.

Stumpleg is exhausted. But what is he to do? They are playing by the rules. If one of them had stepped out of the play area, that would have saved him. But then that would mean that he is not a good enough runner. Rascals! They are clearly conspiring against him. Stumpleg feels a great anger rise in his chest. His fingers itch to tighten round Shortie or Tallfellow.

The late afternoon sun pours its heat down relentlessly. Stumpleg sweats and starts running again. Belly feels almost sorry for him. He is strong, but his leg lets him down at moments like this. Maybe they should not tease him so badly, she thinks. She even wonders if she should let herself be

caught. But how? She must make sure that he does not notice her setting herself up. If he even suspects that she has allowed herself to be caught, he will never forgive her. Should she do it? Belly knows that neither Shortie nor Tallfellow are likely to give up on the game.

They are in fact thrilled with themselves. Excited at being able to outwit Stumpleg. They are not at all tired. They smile and wink at each other and through elaborate hand gestures and sly grins plot to run this way and that to keep out of Stumpleg's reach. They are in a vengeful mood, the two, and want to run on till their feet skim the horizon.

Keep the bastard on his feet, thinks Tallfellow. Make him crawl after us, until he gives up and falls at our feet and begs: "Stop. Don't run, I can't. Not anymore." But they are not going to oblige him. No. He looks at Shortie, who looks equally resolved to continue running. Let Stumpleg fall by the wayside. Let him lie on the ground, limp, heavy and breathless, like a sluggish old snake. Tallfellow is beyond caring.

Stonedeaf is alarmed at the boys' intent. She realises that anything can happen if she does not stop the game.

"Aiy! The goats! They are running into the lakebed. Get them. Now! If they get in, we won't be able to bring them back."

The players freeze in their places. Shortie and Tallfellow are furious. A minute before they almost defeated Stumpleg. He has been running after them like a mad man, the long tail of his loincloth flapping about his legs like a hill-monkey's tail. And now Stonedeaf has spoilt it all, just when the game has reached its climax.

"Yes, yes! The goats! Come on! Can't keep playing and lose them."

Stumpleg yells out, glad to be back in command. Belly suppresses a smile as she looks down into the lakebed, trying

to see if the goats have indeed got in there. Even so, her tightly pursed lips give her away. Stumpleg feels helpless anger wash over him. If only she stood closer. He would have got hold of her by her thick, wiry hair and hit her on the jaw.

Belly runs towards the lakebed. It is close to dusk and she feels the world drawing itself in and closing tightly around her. She does not like it, this sundown hour. She sees the goats feeding safely away from the lakebed. Their faces appear thinner and sadder than they did in the morning. Shortie and Tallfellow come down the mud bank. They walk slowly. They too do not want the day to end. Belly feels a lump in her throat. She almost hugs a palm-tree. Only her white he-goat has ventured to the edge of the lakebed. He stands with his forelegs on the lower branches of a kiluva tree trying to get at the juicy leaves in the branches above. His tongue leaps in and out of his mouth, hanging in the air for a while before his jaws can snap up the leaves.

Belly detests calling this rascally goat to order. He refuses to feed with the rest of the herd, always runs away on his own. She picks up a sharp-edged stone and aims it at the goat's back. The stone catches him on the leg, and almost gashes it. The goat lets out a loud, startled and hurt bleat and runs back to the herd. Belly laughs. A moment later a goat yelps and yowls from within the herd. Belly's face contorts with fear. Not hers certainly. Not Shortie's. She knows his goats.

She jumps up and runs towards the feeding goats. And she sees her—standing upright, her face raised to the sky. A pregnant goat. The goat stands tense and tight, her tail wagging furiously, and pisses. First-time pregnant, and this is definitely a birth-yowl, thinks Belly.

A goat that has given birth before does things differently. Once the birthing pain starts, she gets ready. Lies down on

the ground, gets up, walks a bit, lies down again. She is not afraid or anxious. She gets itself into a comfortable position and pushes the kid out into the world. As if she were shitting the creature out. Once the kid is on the ground the mother bends and starts licking it.

But a first-time pregnant goat is something else. She yowls and yelps and walks about, not knowing what to do.

"Shortie! Tally! Come here! A pregnant goat! She's going to deliver!"

Belly's cracked voice sounds like a crow's lonely call. Shortie and Tallfellow come bounding to where she stands. On seeing them the pregnant goat jumps and starts running into the thick of the herd.

"It's Stumpleg's!"

Shortie is excited.

"Brother! Your pregnant goat is going to deliver!"

Tallfellow calls out to Stumpleg. Stumpleg shivers. He feels thrilled, but also afraid. He gets up and starts running towards the mud bank. With his one good leg he hops over and beyond the plots. Stonedeaf follows him. Belly feels the sad tightness of the twilight hour relax. Time flows once again, falling softly like a million grains of ploughed-up sand. Her heart is flush with love for the pregnant goat.

The goat continues to run, spilling blood. She seems crazed with the strangeness and pain of birth. At times she surges forward almost running into the other goats, but she never once leaves the herd. Belly wants to call the goat to her, and run her fingers along her back.

"Always been a scared goat. First-time pregnant. Won't let me touch her!"

Stumpleg arrives, gasping for breath and words. The goat does not seem to have noticed him. Instead she scratches the earth with her forelegs and scatters dust all around her.

She raises her head and lets out a loud cry. Stumpleg is now anxious. What if the kid's head has turned and is lying cross-wise inside? He tries to move towards the distraught mother, but knows that there is not much that he can do. She is sure to bound away from him if he goes too close. He thinks of his Gounder. If something happens to the mother or kid, he, Stumpleg, will suffer for it.

Shortie, Tallfellow and Belly gather around him and the goat, their hearts thumping. Stonedeaf's charge looks up from her lap and chortles.

Why doesn't the goat lie down? Stumpleg is perplexed. Why must she stand or run around in circles? The other goats are not bothered and continue to graze. Mad goat! But he must do nothing to alarm the creature. Let me wait, wait and see, thinks Stumpleg. He sits down on the mud bank. The others turn to him. Belly's eyes remain fixed on the goat.

"Brother! It's broken! The birth-sac! It's broken!"

Stumpleg looks into the herd. The goat is still on her feet. She continues to scratch at the earth with her feet and scream. He knows that there are goats that give birth standing. With such creatures one must be careful. Watch out for the moment when the mother heaves out the life inside her and hold a hand out for the kid. Otherwise, the kid can fall down and tear its umbilical cord. Sometimes a kid just drops out, placenta and all. In such cases it does not get hurt.

The goat's screams are now peppered with grunts. A small head pops up and above her behind. Shortie cannot hold himself back any longer.

"Brother! Let's do something! Tells us what to do, Brother!"

Stumpleg remains silent. Belly thinks the mother should be pegged down. That may speed up matters. But who is to tell Stumpleg? Not her. He thinks he is a know-all, and won't ask her.

The goat bends her body a bit and grunts loudly.

At that moment, touched by the low, slanting rays of the evening sun, a kid hurtles forth into the world.

Shortie darts forward and holds his right hand out. The kid, still in its birth-sheath, drops gently into his open palm. Terrified, the mother goat shoots forward into the herd, trailing a line of placenta behind her. The kid wriggles its way out of its birth-sheath and tries to jump out.

Shortie is bewildered. Kid in hand, he stands staring at the running goat. The goat appears oblivious to what she has just done. She picks at the grass at her feet, not sure if she has brought forth a kid, or had a good shit.

Stumpleg is furious. He strides across and slaps Shortie on his cheek.

"Look what you've done! You've scared her. As it is she is difficult. Who asked you to put your hand out?"

Saying this, he disentangles the kid from Shortie's fingers and leaves it on the ground. He starts to disengage it from the remnants of its birth-sheath. Shortie's cheek is warm. Then hot. As if he has been struck with a broad but sharp-edged stone. Tears stream down his face. Stumpleg looks at him for a moment and then returns to cleaning the kid.

Belly and Tallfellow try to calm Shortie down. They examine his cheek. It is bruised and bears the imprint of Stumpleg's long fingers. Belly takes off the towel that Shortie wears on his head and rolls its ends into a ball. She blows into it and when it is warm applies the balled-up piece of cloth to the hurt cheek.

"Don't Belly. That burns!"

Shortie tries to stop her. He has not stopped crying. His cheek is swollen and with each whimper threatens to swell more.

"Enough! Stop it."

Tallfellow tries to console him. This makes him cry even more.

The goat grazes quietly, as if nothing has happened. Everyone is at a loss for words. Stonedeaf looks sad and slightly alarmed.

Shorn of its birth-sheath, the kid looks ready for the world. It bleats and tries to stand up. Its mouth searches for its mother's teats. Would it have fallen down on the ground and hurt itself, if Shortie had not put his hand out? Who knows?

"Aiy! All of you! Come on!"

Stumpleg orders them, sounding as if he has already forgiven Shortie. But no one answers his call. Stumpleg grits his teeth. What do they know? If anything had happened to the kid... he has to face his Gounder, not these bloody rascals. All they have to do is to wipe the sand off their bottoms and move on. But I? Muttering to himself, he picks up the kid. Now he has to make sure the mother acknowledges it as hers and feeds it. He is not sure if this will happen. What if the goat stubbornly refuses to accept the kid?

"Aiy, look! Why don't you help me bring the mother to the kid?"

Belly and Tallfellow hesitantly move away from the weeping Shortie, and Stonedeaf who sits, child on lap. The child tries to jump into Shortie's arms. Smilingly, the baby places a finger on his little nose and smiles. Shortie smiles back through his tears. He gets up and joins the others.

The four of them go into the herd, ready to encircle and trap the truant mother goat. The goat stands frozen, her ears stiff with fear, her eyes ready to pop out from her face. Making strange noises in their throats, the four move closer and closer. Suddenly Stumpleg is behind her, grabbing the goat

by her hind legs. She yelps and tries to free herself. Stumpleg now has his hand around her neck and begins to gently stroke it. Gradually the goat gives in and stands still. Tallfellow runs and returns with the kid. He brings it to the mother goat's teats. Unsure, the goat hits out at the kid with her forelegs. Stumpleg bends down and runs his fingers over her teats softly. Once again, Tallfellow takes the kid to the goat.

The goat shivers and lets the kid tug at her teats. Stumpleg knows that it is going to be alright. He looks at Shortie. He has taken the child in his arms and is playing with it.

Stumpleg's face breaks into a wide grin.

Eight

Hearing shouts and laughter from across the mud bank, Stumpleg looks up. He is still with the mother goat and kid. Belly, Tallfellow and Shortie have climbed up the slope and are now running down the side of the Big Rock. Stonedeaf runs behind them, stopping now and then to tighten the child to her waist. Stumpleg stands up.

Selvan and Mani. Selvan is the son of Shortie's Gounder Master. Mani is Belly's Gounder's son. Each has a stick in his hand and throws it up to catch it again. They have slid down the slope of the small bank that separates the fields from the path to the village. It is a good slope to slide, but not to run down. A small hasty step is enough to send a person tumbling into the fields below. But sliding is different. The boys often sit on top of the bank, raise their bottoms a few inches off the ground and race down, their feet kicking merrily in the air. Today, as everyday, their hoarse shouts echo all around.

Stumpleg feels his stomach go warm. Time will pass fast now, he thinks. So fast that the others won't notice it until dusk falls and their faces fade into the darkness. Stumpleg does not like Mani and Selvan coming to the fields. He cannot boss them around. Or order them to play games that he wants to play. When they arrive, the fields become theirs and the long day slips into their hands before it turns in for the night. He will not be heeded anymore.

The goat sniffs around the kid. She is still a bit unsure and each time the kid tugs at her teats, a shiver runs through her spine. Stumpleg knows that for the rest of the evening, he will have to stay with the goat and her kid, make sure they are together. A good thing too, he tells himself.

Otherwise, he will eat his heart out, wondering if he should play with the others or not. Yet his ears burn with the happy shouts that reach him from below. His heart knocks at his chest in excitement, but he holds himself back. He must not care for them, for those sounds of play.

The kid is still unsure and does not find its mother's teats easily. It sucks instead at Stumpleg's little finger. Now and then its mouth knocks against its mother's hind legs. The kid has barely begun to breathe and all it wants to do is eat. Unsteady on its feet, its mouth looking to fasten on the mother's teats—its stomach is all. All sorts of thoughts crowd his head, as his hands, slimy from touching the mother's teats and handling the kid, mechanically push the kid towards the mother.

The revelry from below continues—like mynahs drunk on toddy, the children screech and scream. Stumpleg does not want to heed their joy, but is helpless. Even Stonedeaf is down there and he is alone. He wishes he were deaf, at least for the moment. He does not want to look up, and past the mud bank to where they are.

Today Selvan and Mani have come without Kunjaal, the daughter of Tallfellow's Gounder household. These children study at the village school in Goundanpalayam, a few miles away. Every evening, barely home from school, they elude their mothers' watchful eyes and race to the fields before they are caught and held back at home. They have learned not to mind voices that follow them. "Look! I don't want you dancing around with those chakkili rascals. And if you do, forget about food tonight." Or "Don't know how you can get your shirt that dirty. Must have been rolling about in the fields with those chakkili varmints."

Fathers are different. They don't usually care about what the children do. Not unless a few goats play truant and escape on their nimble feet to feed in fields, green with crop.

There are such goats that wait for their herders to look away and in a trice jump across and over the fence and onto the sown earth. Then fathers get angry.

"Will you play again?" A whip made of rope falls on a whimpering chakkili. "Will you?"

Sometimes, a father may do it the other way. The whip changes direction and lands on the gounder children: "Teaches you to join in with these rascals!"

But the children do not think of their fathers often. Why should they? There is the glowing yellow of the evening light, the cool breeze of the hills that cradles and soothes the body. And the joy of red dust: on their faces, arms, legs. For the children from school, the day is not done, unless they come to the fields. When they go back home, they are invariably asked:

"Aiy! You touched that chakkili? Have you washed?"

"Of course not! Not even his finger tip."

The mother goat is busy licking the wetness off the kid's back, her tongue swishes this way and that on the newborn fluff. Stumpleg is relieved. He did not think the mother would come around so soon. He feels sorry for Shortie. Maybe he ought not have not beaten him. Poor fellow, how he sobbed.

Voices reach him from above, confused and happy. He hears Stonedeaf laugh loudly. Holding the kid to his chest, he raises himself up, and on his knees, to peer over the mud bank. They are all gathered near the twin palm. Selvan and Mani are talking. Shortie stands grinning. He cannot see Tallfellow's face. Or Stonedeaf's. They have their backs to him. He wants to get up and kick them all. Thuuu! A line of thick spittle lands on the goat's back. Stumpleg wipes his mouth and wonders if they are talking about him. He is almost sure they are.

"Dai! Where's Stumpleg?"

It is Selvan. He stands away from the palm, and on an elevated piece of land that rises up from the fields and goes on to join the mud bank. Selvan's eyes peer down into the cluster of goats, searching for Stumpleg.

Stumpleg lowers himself, one hand still holding the kid while the other rubs the goat's neck gently. He presses himself against the goat and stays still. He must make himself smaller, must not be found out. He crouches and draws his legs to his chest. He is now a goat, as small as any of them. Selvan cannot find him out.

"Dai! Stumpy! Come out! Show your face!"

Stumpy indeed! A shrimp of a boy calls him that. A boy who does not even reach his knees. He feels safe with the goats, even comforted. His fingers play with the down on the goat's back. He gazes at it fondly. The goat is lost to all but the kid who still feeds at her teats.

"Stumpy! You dog!"

Barely as big as a gooseberry and yet how he throws his voice about. If Shortie or Tallfellow had dared to call him names, he would know what to do. Tear their stomachs open and draw their intestines out.

Selvan stands, his hands on his hips, and looks around. Thinks he is a big landlord. His father doesn't own more than two acres of land and yet how arrogant that makes him. Stumpleg's disgust boils over. He knows that Selvan finds him odd and funny. He is always at him, teasing him, calling him Stumpy. Once he called him and pointed to a patch of earth.

"Dai Stumpy, look! I've written your name."

Stumpleg looked down. A thick, yielding patch of earth and on it, squiggles, like a mess of tiny insects.

"How have you written my name Master?"

"How else? S-t-u-m-p-y..."

Selvan got away with it because he was a gounder boy. And he knew it too. But one day he'll get it from me, thinks Stumpleg recalling that incident.

"Stumpy! Aiy, show your face." Selvan persists. "Shortie! Where the hell has he gone? Sure he's down there?"

Stumpleg knows there is no getting away from it. He holds onto the goat and stands up slowly. No fear of the goat running away, but he must have a reason for staying on and not answering Selvan's call.

"Master, here I am. Look!"

Selvan runs down the mud bank and comes to where he is.

"Motherfucker! I keep on yelling and you don't say anything. Think you're great? All the good gounder food you eat must be going to your head. I'll make sure you get to eat less. Then you'll learn."

Selvan speaks in his father's voice. He takes on his father's angry tone.

What good gounder food? And besides, Selvan doesn't feed me, does he? Stumpleg fumes to himself. And even my Gounder doesn't feed me for free. Don't I work for it? Little knock-kneed sneak. One of these days I'll strangle his bloody throat. Sneak-face.

Stumpleg rages inside, savours the word 'Sneak-face' on his tongue several times, but does not talk. They all call Selvan that, but not to his face. Stumpleg waits until Selvan's moment of anger passes. Then, gathering all the patience he can muster, replies:

"What, Master? Why so angry? Look, it's this kid—I need to be with it. The mother is a bad one. She wanted to run away..."

His even tone does not reveal the raw anger that chokes

his throat. Yet his reply irks Selvan.

"Dai! Big man, eh? Can't reply, eh? And all the time you've been here... I'll break your other leg, then you'll learn."

Stumpleg knows what to say. In a voice more humble and contrite than before, he replies softly:

"Master, please don't get angry. It's this goat. She gets scared easily. That's why I didn't answer you. Can't catch her if she runs away. I was going to speak after I calmed her. And you've gone and got angry..."

"Alright, alright. Coming to play with us or not?"

Selvan is obviously pleased at Stumpleg's answer. He sounds calm now and soothed, as if the evening breeze has cooled his angry skin.

"What game?"

"Stone-pinching."

"You go ahead and start, Master. I'll come soon. After I help this goat settle down with the kid."

Selvan looks happy. With the evening sun on his face he goes away, glad that Stumpleg has agreed to join his game.

"Alright. But come soon, alright?"

Selvan walks back towards the twin palm. In a nearby plot stand the others, obviously waiting for him. They must have sent him, knowing that Stumpleg will agree to play if Selvan asks him to. Not one of them has the courage to ask Stumpleg to do anything for them. Stumpleg knows that he does not have to go immediately. Selvan does not expect him to do that either. But he must go sometime. Maybe when the game is well into its climax and everyone is excited. That way, no one will notice him.

And even if they do, they won't ask him to join the game. For if he does, then the game was sure to end in an unexpected mess and they have to start again. Also, Stumpleg

is no ordinary player. If he plays, they have to slow down and lose the momentum they have built until then. The others will also want to know how he intends to play and with whom, whether he will be on his own or not. But they cannot do this, if he comes in the middle of a game. Especially when they are intensely in it and aching to win.

He need not worry about the goat and kid anymore. The mother licks it from time to time and makes tender noises in her throat as she nuzzles the kid. Stumpleg moves away from the animals and looks around. He sees a long, knotted piece of flesh hanging from the goat's behind. He has forgotten the placenta. It should fall soon or he must make sure it does. Some goats eat the placenta. If that happens, their milk dries up. Who knows what this goat will do? He stands staring at the placenta. Anytime now.

The happy noise of play floats over from the fields below. The game is in full swing. Stone-pinching is Selvan's favourite game. And if he wants to play it, everyone complies. Never mind that they have been playing something else. No one dares tell him they should carry on and finish the previous game. Whatever Selvan says goes. Even Mani obeys him implicitly.

Stumpleg gives a start. The placenta has fallen off. The goat appears unconcerned. She is all over the kid, smelling it, licking its neck, making funny sounds. The goat's short tail is bloody. Stumpleg walks around the goat and kid, looking for the placenta. Surely the goat cannot have eaten it! He finds it at last, a mass of flesh and blood.

He looks up and around, searching for Poochi. There it is, sleeping by the well. Poochi is an odd dog. He hangs about the fields all day and stands guard at the goat pens in the night and he is fed for the effort. He does not go into the village where he is bound to find all sorts of leftovers. Field-guard Poochi, thinks Stumpleg, as he looks affectionately at

the dog, who is now a mere shape in the gathering twilight.

Stumpleg sees an erukkan plant a few feet away from where he is. It stands white and upright, shooting out of the ground from a stately stem. He pulls it out of the soil carefully. The plant's grey, rubbery underside tickles his fingers. He holds the plant gingerly not wanting the juice to spill on him. With a twist of his arm he brings the plant down on the placenta, and mutters:

"Keep your poison, but release the milk. Release the milk and keep your poison."

He beats the placenta three times and then throws the plant away. He looks at Poochi again. Still asleep in its sandy hole, curled up for comfort.

"Poochi, what a meal you'll have tonight!"

Saying this, he tries to pick up the placenta using his goatherd's stick. It slips and slides but soon he has it strung like a garland on his stick. What a long thing!

"A feast, Poochi! Eat this and you won't eat anything for three days!"

He throws it as far as he can, aiming at the general direction of the well. It lands near the rise of the mud bank. He walks up to where it has landed. He stands there and calls out.

"Poochi! Poochi! Dai!"

Poochi first opens one eye, then another.

"Poochi!"

Up in a bound, the dog comes running to him. Poochi does not eat unless told to. It sits by a pot of food and doesn't touch it until someone asks it to. Stumpleg points to the placenta. Poochi runs to where it is, sniffs and looks up at him with grateful eyes. Stumpleg tells it to go ahead and it does. Poochi will eat on for a while. It is a big, strong dog

and mops up things nicely. Soon nothing will be left of the placenta.

Stumpleg looks down at the mother and kid. They are still together. No fear on that score now. When it is time to lead them home, he will carry the kid in his arms and the mother, doglike in her affection, will caper after him. He walks to where the others are playing. No one sees him. Or maybe they do and don't really care. He finds a palm and sits under it, resting his back against its rough trunk. Stonedeaf is still in the game. But not for long now, thinks Stumpleg. How much longer can she run with that child on her hips? What a thing, always there with her! Stitched to her, like a bee fastened to a flower.

Stone-pinching is a difficult game too. It is played on a marked-out square. A player stands in each of the four corners, also marked as squares. If there are more players, more points are marked on the square for them to stand. In the centre is a pile of stones—each stone is round and thick, big enough to be held snugly in a fist. Lots are drawn to decide on the 'dummy'. The dummy circles the centre, guarding the stones. The others have to try and get the stones without being caught by the dummy. They move from and retreat into their squares, teasing the dummy. Their squares are their forts—once within, they cannot be caught. The game goes on till the stones are all taken or someone is captured while stealing a stone. Then he or she becomes the next dummy.

Right now, Belly is the dummy. She goes round and round the stones. Selvan, Shortie, Mani and Tallfellow come at her from the four corners. Stonedeaf is in the middle of one of the sides. Shortie makes as if he is going to pounce on the stones, and then retreats to his corner. Stonedeaf does the same. As she runs back to her point on the square, the child on her hips laughs loudly. The running must have

tickled the baby into mirth. They play for a long time, sneaking away with stones, screeching, laughing and kicking up red dust. The dust forms a halo around the players, filtering the dusky yellow of the dipping sun. They can barely see each other.

Belly screams in delight. She has caught someone. Who can it be? Stumpleg peers into the gathering dark. Tallfellow. Must have wagged his bottom at her, long-tailed loincloth and all, and she has got him.

Tallfellow is not particularly bothered. He is bound to get hold of someone very soon. The stones are back in the centre and the game starts. Stumpleg hopes Stonedeaf does not get caught. She hates being a dummy. With that child on her hips, whom can she hope to catch? Often, if she is caught, she gives up on the game. Or starts crying. Tallfellow is vigilant. No one dares to swoop down on the stones. But they try, moving menacingly from their corners to the centre.

Just as he moves back to his corner, Shortie is captured. He does not expect it and is angry.

"I'd already reached when you touched me."

"No! You were miles away!"

Tallfellow is insistent. Selvan attempts to mediate. He holds up a closed fist.

"Okay! Shortie! Tell me what I have in my hand—flower or fruit? If you get it right, you get off. If you don't, you're the dummy."

Shortie does not get it right, and sulks as he takes his place in the centre of the square. Stumpleg watches Shortie at the game. Short legs and a swollen belly. Like a hen. He smiles at the thought.

Shortie the mother hen is out there, guarding her nest. They are her very life. All around her are eagles, waiting their time. They suddenly take flight and hover in the air

and then swoop down, circling the nest. They go up, return and fly back—this time to their perch on a faraway palm.

Stumpleg warms to his tale.

The hen's attention wanders and the eagles take their chance. They dive down to get their prey, but the hen is on the alert again. She squawks and comes rushing at the intruders. The eagles retreat. They are no ordinary eagles, but flesh-eating birds. Their claws are long, polished and bloody. A lone hen against four eagles. But the hen is strong because she has to be, guard what is hers, of her blood, her flesh.

Stumpleg snorts.

The thieving eagles can never hope to win. The hen is fearless, courage makes her body shiver. If she flaps her wings about and shoots into the air and comes down on an eagle, her strong beak can gouge the flesh out from an eagle's side. And this hen knows all about eagles—how they pretend to be quiet, peaceful, almost like doves and then, in a trice, change into violent birds that attack hapless chicks. The hen will not let this happen. She has laid each one of her eggs with effort. Each time an egg plopped out, her arse burnt and she had gone on to hatch them with the fire in her stomach. She knows she must be careful, she has to look after her chicks, protect them, feed them. If she is to spend an extra minute in fetching food, the chicks will be lost to her. A single eagle can carry them away, to be shared and eaten with other eagles. They are thick, those eagles, the hen is solitary. But when she struts, the eagles back off. Yet, there is not a minute to be lost.

But it is not easy. The air is thick with dust. And the hen cannot see very well. An eagle plucks a chick from under her very eyes. She goes after the fiend, but meanwhile the other eagles alight on the chicks. And now there is only one chick left. The hen is careful. She does not attack the

aggressor, nor does she take flight. She knows she cannot fly too high or fast. She knows too that she must not attack, but defend what she has. She would rather spread her wings and guard her single egg. For what is gone is gone.

A lone eagle continues to torment the hen. A hungry eagle. The others have found their prey and he must have his own. The others stand by and cheer. Now and then they threaten to bear the chick away themselves. The hen fights valiantly. Should she hug the chick to herself, hold it snug under her wing? But she has to go and find it food. The eagle is merciless and gets at the chick. He tries to fly with his prey, but realizes he cannot. His legs are held down. The hen is still fighting and has managed to hold her tormentor.

Stumpleg is thrilled that it is Selvan. Selvan is the dummy. The others clap their hands. Selvan scowls and reluctantly gets into the centre of the square. Stumpleg has another story coming. What should Selvan be—a deer, bear rabbit, monkey or pig? Yes, yes, he is a pig. And the rest are foxes wanting to prey on the tiny piglets in the centre. The pig is nonplussed. He knows the game well, but is flurried. He does not want to be surprised. Or lose a piglet. But the foxes are strong and cunning, their bared teeth fasten on the piglets greedily. And soon there are no piglets left.

Selvan is not happy. He does not want to play. Stumpleg grins to himself. Serves the pig right, serves you right, Selvan.

"What Master? Dummy again?"

Stumpleg is on his feet now. But he remains under the palm. Selvan does not reply. He is agitated and his feet fly about, unsure of how to stand guard. He wants to catch one of the rascals, get at them. Meanwhile, the stones start to disappear one by one. He continues to chase them to their corners. No use.

And then, just as Shortie steps into his corner, Selvan manages to touch him.

"Caught you!"

"No!"

"Liar! I got you!"

"No, Master. I was in already. You touched me after I got in!"

"Dai! You are the dummy now!"

"No, Master."

"Chakkili bastard! Liar! You bloody touched me, and now you lie. I'll tell my mother. Tell her how you play and don't mind the goats. I'll make sure she beats you!"

Selvan's face swells with fury and tears run down his cheeks. He is possessed by a huge shame. He starts to run, then stops, picks up a sharp stone and aims it at Shortie. Shortie steps aside and the stone flies past him. Selvan cries even more and curses Shortie loudly. And runs as fast as his feet can carry him.

No one says anything. Suddenly Shortie realises what has happened and tears after Selvan.

"Master. Don't! Don't go! I'll be the dummy!"

"Don't touch me, you dog!"

Selvan shakes off a trembling Shortie and continues to run through the plots and down the sloping dry waterway beyond the small bank, till he is out of sight of the rest gathered in the field. Shortie sits down on his haunches, feeling tired and small.

Stumpleg walks towards Shortie. He is barely visible, a small shadow in the dark. The goats wind their way back home through the fields. They pass by the miserable Shortie.

Fine Mud

Nine

Lantern in hand, Shortie finds his way through the pitch-dark fields to the goat pen. Selvan is with him. Hearing their footsteps, Poochi lets out a happy yowl. Selvan has a pot of food in his hands. Jumping this way and that, Poochi strains at the chain that binds it to a peg outside the pen. Shortie picks up the bowl that lies face down near the dog, and shakes it out.

"Dai, Poochi! Shut up! You'll snap off that chain jumping like this."

"Alright, hurry up and give the thing its food."

Selvan is impatient.

"Wait, Master, there's so much muck inside. Can't pour food into a dirty bowl..."

Shortie places the cleaned-up bowl a little away from Poochi.

"Poochi! Shut up, will you?"

The dog stiffens and pulls its ears back but continues to look eagerly at the bowl. Selvan crumbles the kambu balls into the water in which they float. He pours the kanji into the bowl and pushes it towards the dog. Poochi sticks its head in and starts eating.

Poochi is tied to the pen in the evenings, when the goats are brought in from the field. Shortie finishes his evening chores at the cow shed, eats his night meal and arrives at the pen hours afterwards. The dark does not bother him, at least not for a while. He waits for the conch to blow from Tiruchengode hill. He knows it is eight o'clock then. No goat thief is likely to come at that early hour of the night.

Shortie's Gounder's goat pen is the only one for miles

around. The next pen is four fields away, near Kandamoopan's hut. If Shortie shouts, the old toddy-tapper will not be able to hear him.

Shortie and Selvan guard the goat pen. It is a familiar field and they are used to doing this. The Gounder sleeps in the cow pen, filled with priceless cows, buffaloes and oxen. It is close to his house, but he does not trust anyone with its charge. The cattle have to be fed at least twice in the night. At dawn, the milkman comes with his huge cans and he needs help, someone to distract the cow while he milks it. It is easy to tether a buffalo calf, but not the young of a cow. They are known to strain at the ropes that hold them back and only a man who knows their wild ways can actually tether them to their posts.

Shortie wonders often if gounders ever sleep in their own homes. At nightfall, after they have eaten their last meal for the day, they set out, staff in hand, each to their goat or cow pens. A pot of fresh toddy awaits them there. Kandamoopan or one of his kin makes sure of that. Shortie has seen his Gounder drink an entire pot of brew in one huge gulp. And after that he spits and belches all night...

When does a gounder father a child? Do his Gounder and the Mistress ever lie together? Shortie is not sure—maybe at a very late hour, after he has slept a while at the pen, the Gounder gets up, feeds the cattle and hurries home to his wife.

Sometimes Shortie keeps vigil at the cow pen along with his Master. On those nights, the goats are penned close by as well. While the Master slumbers on a cot in the hut that is part of the pen, Shortie lies on a sack on the floor. Often, Shortie has woken up to find the Gounder's cot empty. Sometimes he finds him on his feet, tightening his loincloth around his hips and getting ready to go home, to his wife. This happens at an early uncertain hour of the morning,

when the oldest cockerel in the village crows. Which is why the old, rebuking their wayward young exclaim, "God knows at what untimely hour your father decided to untie his loincloth".

Only in the summer are the goats penned away from gounder homes. Every so often the pen shifts, so that goat shit, that excellent manure, is spread evenly across the fields. Not just shit, even goats' piss is good for the soil. But goats' piss excites the fox and the wild dog, and drawn by it, they are known to raid the pen and carry away a goat or two. Shortie has heard other stories as well, of the nomadic and adventurous kuravans who are adept at stealing goats from under watchful gounder eyes. These tales of thieving valour are know to almost all children. But he has yet to see a kuravan walk away with a goat.

There's no shortage of goat-thieves, though, mutters Shortie. Why, your neighbour from the next farmhouse can poach on your goats, slaughter it and have the impudence to sell you meat the next day. Shortie is not too worried though, or afraid of being alone. Only the Gounder does not ever let him guard the goats on his own. Therefore, Selvan.

Shortie loves the fields by night. Even better than he does during the day. His eyes are soon used to the darkness and after some time disdain even the faraway glitter of the stars. He loves to lie on the mud, press his ear to the earth. The earth hoards a lot of stories, he knows that. Stories from long ago that insist on being let into his ears. He does not think the likes of Selvan can ever know these tales. Where do they sleep or even lie on the earth? Unlike Selvan, Shortie sleeps on the very mud of the land, with only a ragged sack to cover himself.

Shortie thinks he is blessed that way. He is happy for the steady hum of night-time insects that echo through the dark stretch of the night. Sometimes he hears a bird roused from

sleep calling desolately across the fields. There are other birds of the dark—solitary fliers who have lost their way and are desperate to find their nests; water fowl that love to fish under cover of dark in the tiny sliver of serene water by the edge of the lake; baby bats whose wings set up a rustle as they flap about the tender palm. Listening to these, he lies awake until his eyelids droop, heavy with sleep.

He cannot sleep for long. Poochi barks, he hears a goat's complaining bleat. After this, sleep plays truant and he stays awake until dawn, staring into the dark. If by chance he has a bidi he lights it, and feels comforted.

Selvan ties the lantern to one of the bamboo stilts that hold up his hut. Startled, a few goats, clustered under the hut, jerk their heads up and start bleating. Others, scattered across the pen, merely stare at him, and continue to chew. Veeran comes to Shortie and thrusts his face into his hands. The bells on his neck set off a jingle. Shortie puts his hand out and rubs the goat's head gently. A grateful Veeran shivers and lingers, wanting him to continue his caress.

"Go on!"

Shortie lets go, picks up a sack from the floor and comes out of the pen.

"Dai! What's all this cuddling about?"

Selvan sniggers as he follows Shortie outside. Shortie smiles to himself. He throws his sack on the ground, across from where Poochi is.

"Shortie! Come and sleep inside?"

Inside, he will have to sleep under Selvan's cot. On the ground beneath the stilts. Sleep with the smell of goat shit in his nose. Not that he minds. In fact he does not know a time when he has not carried that smell around. But the kids are another matter. They are never still, constantly trying to snuggle up to him, jump all over him. Sometimes goats

are trouble too. A goat that he has scolded or beaten tries to get even with him. Once a goat brushed against him abruptly and pissed in his face. In any case, there is piss everywhere. Many nights he has woken up, feeling a spray of piss wet his face. On rainy nights, he has no choice and has to seek shelter under the stilts. At other times, though, he prefers the field—broad, dark and inviting.

Selvan has to sleep in, and on his cot. He likes his pillow and sheet and does not care for the dark. He fears it and prefers to stay snug inside. Tonight though, he does not want to sleep alone. Maybe because the pen has been put up only recently and Selvan is still a bit afraid of being alone inside the hut.

"No master. Too stuffy in there."

Selvan stands uncertainly, then sits down on a stone.

Shortie wishes he would go in and sleep. He longs to light a bidi but does not want to, with Selvan around. Stumpleg introduced Shortie to bidis. He brings him some, each time he goes to Tiruchengode.

Shortie shuts his eyes tight hoping Selvan will go away. A while later, he opens them. Selvan is still there.

"Can't sleep Master?"

"No... but looks like you're ready to snore."

Selvan is ungracious. He waits for a while and then launches into his school stories, the games he played that day, his classes... this happens all the time. Today he has other things in mind. He boasts to Shortie about his plans to go to the village temple festival and watch the temple chariot being drawn by the faithful. Shortie's ears buzz with the thrum of Selvan's drone. It is a flood, that can drown him...

Shortie cannot bear it any longer. He must interrupt, speak to Selvan of things he likes to hear, make him feel happy. Maybe then he can smoke, without being scolded or teased.

He rushes in when Selvan pauses for a moment—promises to take him fishing in the lake, to fetch him the baby dove he saw in an abandoned nest by the field-well, the last time he was there bathing, promises to...

Selvan relaxes and is all smiles. Now's the time, Shortie thinks. Cautiously and shyly, he pulls off the towel wrapped around his head and starts to unravel its knotted end. He finds a bidi, and with a swift, practised manner, puts it to his mouth and lets it hang limp from his lips. Then he cups his fingers around it, strikes a light and inhales deeply. He watches the end of his bidi glow and blows a ring of smoke into the night sky. Just as he has seen Selvan's grandfather do. The man smokes cheroots and Shortie has always marvelled at the way he blows smoke rings into the air.

"Aiy Shortie! New habit of yours? Since when?"

Shortie does not reply. He is wrapped in himself and relishes every smoke-tinged breath that he draws in. Looking at him, Selvan wants to smoke too. His stomach feels a tug of desire, but he is not sure if he should ask Shortie for a bidi. What if he sneaks on him, carries tales to his mother? She would beat him, that's for sure: "A school-going lad smoking? Rascal!"

"Not me, not me. It's him, he made me smoke..." He can, of course, point to Shortie, but his mother will not let him off that easily. "So? That chakkili dog sucks on this bidi and you take it from him? And put it in your mouth?"

No use. Selvan tries to think of other things and sits quietly, scanning the sky from time to time with furtive eyes. Shortie is now almost done. One last puff and it is over. He throws the bidi end away and stamps it firmly into the mud. His heart feels full. The lights on Tiruchengode hill appear brighter than ever, glimmering alongside the icy glow of the stars. He feels reassured and leans back against the wall of the pen. Those lights are comforting. A bright straggly line.

Some nights they do not come on and he feels alone and forlorn.

"Look! A fire!"

Selvan points to a line of dancing flames in the distance. Shortie looks past his pointing finger and sees tongues of fire peeling the dark of the night. Are those huts burning? Cannot be. No huts there in that corner where the Manakkadu road meets the highway to Erode. Maybe someone has put up a goat pen. Who does not like a fire at night? Perhaps even now they are roasting peanuts and palm fruits. The fire does not appear to spread and is not very tall.

"Shortie! Is that a fire-eating spirit?"

Shortie smiles to himself. Selvan cannot possibly know of these things—he has no sense of the fields or the sky. And besides he is afraid of the dark. This is no fire-eating spirit. No spirit beckons cheerily to those it wishes to frighten. Spirits come upon their victims suddenly, almost ambushing them from behind. Sometimes a spirit waits on the roadside, sitting on its haunches, like someone taking a shit. At other times, it holds a cheroot to its gaping mouth. Or saunters down a path, smoking a bidi. And if someone takes the spirit to be human and greets it, the spirit spits fire in that person's face. Fire that rises and falls, that comes out in warm gasps from its stomach and burns a man.

"Master, fire-eating spirits don't do this sort of thing. That must be someone roasting palm fruit."

Selvan shakes his head and goes into the pen. He climbs on to his cot and lies down. Shortie stretches out on the hard earth. He is not afraid. Spirits are like the wind and rain, they come and go. He does not think spirits would dare haunt this part of the field, where the god Munisami rules and protects.

Shortie watches the twin palm sway gently. At last, the wind. Slowly the entire field is captive to the wind. The air turns chilly. This is not the doing of a spirit. He is sure of that. A spirit's wind is burning hot, not like this one that caresses the earth as its own. It has come a long way, the wind, wound its way down Tiruchengode hill to the lakebed, and carries with it the damp of the lake's meagre waters. Shortie pulls his sack over his head.

The wind rasps in his ears, lifting and blowing dry leaves off the ground. Poochi whines. Selvan will not like this, Shortie knows. He is probably shit scared, even now. Spirits are visible only to dogs and cattle. When a dog barks into an empty space, that means he has spied a spirit and is barking at it. Poochi is still though, curled into a ball.

The wind continues to blow, rustling dried palm fronds and still intent on scattering dry leaves far and wide. Shortie shuts his eyes and thinks of the different palm trees around him. He knows each one of them, like a friend. He knows how the fruit in each of them tastes. He knows when the palms flower and mature into flesh, when they are ready to be picked. Even Kandamoopan, the old tree climber does not know these palms as well. He knows the ones that he usually climbs to bring down toddy. But not the others.

Shortie slowly slides into sleep, feeling the wind, the palm and the cool earth in his mouth. He does not hear the soft bleating of mother goats calling to their kids. Lost to the world, he sleeps on, while the land watches over him tenderly.

He sees a tongue of flame move towards him. Now it is in front of him. He has not expected it. Not like this. He stares at it until it grows bigger and bigger. A tall pillar of fire jumps up and down between earth and sky. But there is no smoke. The fire continues to grow until he thinks he has never seen anything as tall, as massive. Not even when the

neighbouring Gounder's huge haystack suddenly burst into flames. He wants to shut his eyes but cannot. His mouth is dry and his tongue feels thick and useless in his mouth. He stands up slowly. Silent, wide-eyed and wondering. The fire changes shape and becomes a column of light. Shortie peers into it. There is a white horse inside. Naked. It does not have a saddle or bridle. A taut, riderless horse that seems to be held by voices coming at it from who knows where.

Even as he watches, the horse neighs and then, unexpectedly, leaps out of the column of light. It sails up and stands several hundred feet on top of the twin palm. Shortie tilts his head back and looks up. No use, he cannot see its head or face. His eyes travel down the length of its body and rest on its legs. It is a black-hoofed horse. A milky white horse with hooves that look as if they have trapped the dark of the night in them.

The light is everywhere now, a million lightning streaks that have come together. The white horse neighs again, this time like a thunderclap. As the sound of the neighing dies, the horse comes down to earth. Dazzling in its own white glow, it bears a rider. A White Munisami, with a chest as long and hard as a rock that stretches on and on. A figure as tall as ten thousand men standing high on high. As steep as the Tiruchengode hill. Shortie cannot bear to look at Munisami. The god sits calmly, a slim palm tree in its right hand.

Shortie blanches. Shivering, he tries to bring his palms together and bends his head to the god. But his fingers shake so much that he cannot pray. He has played around the Muni's temple by the riverside. But he has never felt comfortable with the god's strange red eyes. Now those eyes are on him. Suddenly a tongue of flame appears besides the column of light, as if from nowhere. The flame glows for a moment and then hardens into a bar of fire. A bright red horse leaps out, spilling its heat into the dark, ready to burn

it into black dust.

The red horse neighs loudly, smearing the night with slivers of fire. Burning red fruits that fall all over the field. The earth chars and changes colour. The horse draws itself up and lets out a loud moan. It kicks its legs in the air and dashes against the clouds in the sky. There is fire in the heavens now and still the horse is restless. And then, as if whipped, it quietens and comes down. Shortie has never seen any creature glow like this. As if the dull red of the land around had caught fire and congealed into the molten red of the horse.

At first he does not see it. Rolling its eyes and staring down at Shortie from the horse's back is a fire-spitting Red Munisami. The Red Munisami is an angry god. Each time it draws his breath in, its nostrils flare out in rage. Its face, masked by an intense rage, the Red Munisami stands—ready to suck the whole world into its wrath.

Shortie does not know what to do. Before him stand the two gods. And around him, alongside the white and red horses, are wild hunting dogs. The White Munisami's dogs are quiet, but the Red god's growl and bare their fangs. Shortie recoils from them but feels their eyes on him. They bark together and throw him off his feet with their mean and angry sound. He claws at the earth, to keep himself from falling. The dogs are mad, crazy. As they howl and scream, a storm sets in, whirling red dust into the air.

A while after, all is quiet. The dogs are silent. Something has held them back. Shortie looks up, completely afraid now. The Red Munisami grits its teeth. Shortie feels dizzy, everything seems to be spinning... something warm trickles down his legs.

"Dai! You dare come in the way of my hunting path?"

The Muni's words come at Shortie like a flaming sentence.

But it is a sentence spoken in a language he knows, the familiar language of the village.

"Sami! Sami!"

He can barely hear himself. This is the Red Munisami's hunting path and he, fool that he is, has made his bed on it. Should he beg for forgiveness? The White Munisami is still. Maybe he should appeal to its grace, fall at its feet. But first he must move. Why do his feet feel like lead? Are they weighed down with iron balls? And why do his hands feel odd, suddenly very hard and cold? Was he turning into stone?

He hears something behind him. A sort of chortle. It is Veeran. Veeran, who has been pledged to the Munisami. Veeran runs up to the Muni. Veeran, the fearless goat. He stops in front of the Red Munisami and raises his head to the god. Is Veeran saying something? Maybe he is pleading on his behalf? Or is the goat asking the god to devour Shortie for teasing and scolding him sometimes?

"I won't, not anymore. Won't scold Veeran. Won't tease him. Muniappa! Sami! Save me, save me!"

Shortie tries to pray but finds his tongue is still stiff. He opens his eyes, shuts them, opens them again. It is not dark anymore. Nor light. His eyes discern a line of faint white on the horizon. A dull moon has begun to climb the eastern sky. Where have the sky-high flames gone? He sits up, then lies down again.

He is full of wonder. Not afraid, or worried. He feels a flush of joy warm his body. He has seen the Muni, towering into the sky. He, a speck, a mite of dust beside the god... he is alive, why he could have been dead, charred to ashes. He turns over and finds the sack wet. He reaches down and touches his loincloth. It is damp. He gets up and takes it off. He pulls the towel off his head and ties it around his middle. He hangs the wet loincloth to dry on the pen's bamboo fence.

Shortie looks about him. The field around him looks washed. There is a lone moon in the sky, pouring its silver light down. He hears Veeran grunting from inside the pen. Must be at his favourite task, butting a reluctant she-goat. Shortie sighs. Veeran's love games exasperate him. But for the moment he is happy. For was it not Veeran who saved him from the Muni's rage? Shortie lifts the bamboo poles at the pen's entrance and steps in quietly.

"Who's that?"

Selvan's tone is fearful. Poor Selvan. He must have been petrified all night.

"Me, Master."

Shortie walks to the far end of the pen and extracts a small packet of sacred ash from under a bamboo slat. He takes a pinch of it and smears it on his forehead. He collects sacred ash from pilgrims who have returned from the temple at Palani or elsewhere. At times he even anoints the goats with it. Especially Veeran. He does that now. He goes towards the naughty goat who is bent on worrying a trembling kid and sprinkles ash on his head. Veeran stands still. Shortie cuffs his face and pulls his ears back. Veeran does not move. Selvan sits up, puzzled. He decides to climb down from his cot.

Veeran suddenly arches his back and bleats. The sacred ash on his face scatters into a cloud of dust. Shortie heaves a sigh of relief. He goes down on his knees and prays to the goat. He gestures to Selvan and asks him to pray likewise. Selvan is bewildered. Has Shortie gone mad, going round and round a bloody goat in the middle of the night?

Shortie is at Veeran's feet now, touching them with devotion. He does not seem to mind the smell of piss, the hard, dried balls of goat shit, the awful stench of fresh droppings... it is as if he does not want to let go of Veeran's

feet. The goat tries to kick his forelegs forward, but still Shortie holds on to them. He lets go finally and goes out. His face is bathed in tears. Selvan follows him, not sure if he should talk to Shortie or keep away from him. Was the fellow possessed?

"Dai, what the hell's going on?"

Selvan's screaming question slices through the calm of the night. Poochi's ears go stiff as he looks up at the agitated Selvan. Shortie does not reply. He is all bliss inside and wants to bury his head on Selvan's shoulder. But, of course, he cannot do that. He asks Selvan to sit down and tells him the whole story. Almost the whole story, that is. He does not tell him that fear made him piss in his loincloth.

"Master, it is this Veeran who just saved me. You should have seen him talk! Just like us. How he argued with the Muni. So brave, like a lion..."

"He is the Muni's goat after all..."

"Your father has told me this many times, that this field where we have put up our pen is the Muni's hunting path. The Old Master, your grandfather, has warned me that the Muni wanders this path sometimes. We must move this pen tomorrow and pitch it somewhere else."

Shortie looks at Poochi. He lies curled into a tight ball, like a fat bandicoot. Nothing to fear anymore. He prays silently to Munisami. Sami, this is your goat, please don't trouble us anymore.

Selvan is jealous that it was Shortie who had seen Munisami and not him. But he is also afraid.

"Master, tell your father that this year we must give up Veeran to the Muni. For three years now we have had him..."

"Hmmm... maybe that's why Munisami came tonight, to ask for what is due to him."

"And tell your father you saw the Muni. He won't believe

me. 'So that Chakkili rascal thinks he saw our god...' he'll say."

"True, true. I'll tell him I saw the Muni."

Selvan is happy. He wants to continue talking, but Shortie is tired. Sleep stings his eyes. His body feels slack, given over to a languor that has set into his hands and feet. After what seems to Shortie a very long time, Selvan stands up.

"Sleepy... going in..."

Shortie shakes out his sack, turns it over and prepares to lie down. Things around him appear hazy and he cannot see very well. He feels drunk on the moonlight that is everywhere.

Suddenly he cannot sleep. He wants to, but his heart goes wandering. The night is not the same anymore— it is stained with an unknown fear. What if the Muni appears again, in all his massive height? Should he go in and lie down with the goats? But what if Selvan teases him? He cannot bear that.

He tries to sleep on his side, lies on his stomach, and shuts his eyes tight. The dark edges out the soft light of the moon and wraps him in its relentless black.

Shortie sits up. He can see the inside of the pen. Bands of moonlight have slipped in through the bamboo slats and light up the roof, the walls. Goats and kids lie, half in shadow and half in light. He looks for a while at the moon in the pen. For how long, he asks himself.

"Dai, Shortie!"

Selvan calls to him softly. Shortie immediately presses himself down on the sack. He listens intently. Selvan does not call again. Maybe he was talking in his sleep. Should he have gone in when he first called him?

"Dai! Shortie!"

Shortie is vastly relieved.

"Ummm..."

Let Selvan think he is fast asleep. Too deep in sleep to hear him. But Selvan does not call again. Shortie gives up. He makes a stirring noise, as if he has just woken up.

"Ummm... Master, you called? Want something?"

"Shortie... come in and sleep."

At last.

"There? How Master? It's full of shit. Nice and breezy out here. I'll stay outside..."

They both remain silent for a while. Shortie's eyes are bursting with sleep. Selvan breaks the silence.

"Dai, Shortie..."

"What?"

"Come here."

"Why?"

"When I say come, come."

Shortie steps into the pen. He looks at Selvan on his cot inside the hut, a huddled shape in the darkness.

"What, Master?"

'Dai. Come up here. Sleep on the bed with me."

"No, Master."

"I'm asking you to... come."

"Promise you won't tell your father."

"Look, I'm telling you to come up here. Will I sneak on myself?"

Shortie secures the bamboo poles at the entrance and climbs on to the cot. He has not slept on one before. At least not in the night. Sometimes, in the evenings, when he herds the goats into the pen, he has sat on the cot and stretched

his legs out. The cot had seemed like a box then, a cozy box that held him in. Once or twice he has even lain down on it, and when he looked up, he felt the roof of the hut pressing down on his face. Each time he moved, the cot creaked. He never stayed for long, he was afraid of being caught.

"Shortie, this way. Put your head there."

Selvan points to the foot of the bed. He has his head on the other side. Shortie climbs up and lies down. His feet touch the head of the bed. Unsure and warm with shame, he pulls his feet up and curls himself into as small a form as possible. The ropes that hold the cot press into his back. The cot is as big as the hut, he thinks. And he is there, tightly wedged against Selvan. On no account must his body touch his.

Should he not have accepted Selvan's invitation? Maybe he ought to have come in but slept besides the goats. He feels the roof breathing down on him, the walls holding him in, till he is almost completely breathless. And there lies Selvan whose feet can hit his face anytime. Shortie is not used to sleeping like this. He moves in his sleep, kicks his feet around. Selvan will not like this, my black leg in his face...

"Dai, Shortie! Get up..."

"..."

"Get up and put your head on this side, next to mine."

Selvan's tone is sharp. Shortie gets up and lies down next to Selvan. They hold themselves stiffly and carefully, not wanting to touch each other.

All is quiet now.

As the night hours pass and the dark slowly gives into the grey of dawn, the space between them dissolves. They lie together with Selvan's sheet thrown across both of them.

Ten

The fields lie bathed in the light of a bright half-moon. Darkness has fled the earth, flushed from hole and crevice by the searching moonlight. The sky is a pale blue-white, completely cloudless. The wind is cool and soothing, having slowly shed the heat of day. In a few months time, the same wind will blow vigorously, rousing earth and sky. But for now it is content to gently caress man and beast.

Selvan's cot is outside the hut and pen, next to Shortie's sack. It lies bare and happy, as if it was glad to have left the dusky inside of the hut and opened itself up to the night breeze. Selvan is excited and happy these days. Even when at school he thinks of nights at the goat pen. As soon as he is home, his feet are impatient for the fields. At the twilight hour he gets fidgety and starts to hurry Shortie at his farm tasks. Sometimes he even lends him a hand at the cow pen, so eager is he for Shortie to finish and for them to get to the open fields.

Shortie is embarrassed by Selvan's obvious excitement but also secretly happy. He feels grateful towards his Gounder Master for asking him to take the goats to the field for the night. The goat pen is shifted every so often and there are still places to go before the rains come. Until then he can expect to spend nights alone with Selvan at the pen. Days are still warm but at this time of the year nights are beautiful. Especially when the moon is full. On such nights, Shortie cannot wait to cross the dry waterway that leads from the Gounder's home to the fields. He feels that the hours ahead and the vastness of the land belong to them and them alone.

Tonight Selvan has brought roasted peanuts with him. It

is a treat for Shortie to be eating these, usually he munches on raw peanuts or sun-dried ones. But roasted peanuts are different, and Shortie loves their fragrance. Selvan has brought the peanuts tied in a towel. Shortie is already at them, stuffing the nuts into his mouth. He scoops them up hurriedly and pops them in by the handful. He reminds Selvan of an eager field rat gnawing at the grain, before humans chase it out.

Selvan is full of school as always but today there is a bitterness in his tone that is new.

"What's up Master? Something bothering you?"

"What do you think... I hate school. Don't want to go. You don't know how lucky you are..."

"Me?"

It is a new thought. Shortie has not seen things this way.

"I thought you said school was fun...."

"It is, it is, but not this year. There's a new teacher called Sengodan. Fucking leftovers-eating dog if ever there was one... one of these days I'm going to break his head."

Selvan's eyes brim over as he grits his teeth and curses his new teacher. Shortie wants to console him but does not know how. He looks at Selvan's bent head and shaking shoulders.

"Master, Master what's this? Why cry because of that chap?"

Selvan cries even more. Shortie gets up from the sack and sits down on the cot next to Selvan and holds his hand. A thin, sad hand. He holds it tight, wanting to add his strength to those frail fingers.

"Master, what has that teacher done to make you cry?"

Selvan swallows hard and in a muffled voice, whines.

"Him? The motherfucker's so rough. When I heard he

was going to be my teacher, I wanted to leave school. But you know my mother and father—they won't listen. They spank me back to class everyday..."

"Does the chap beat you?"

"Beat? Just look at this! Is this beating or what is this?"

Selvan holds his right foot up for Shortie to see. At first Shortie cannot make out anything. He runs his fingers over the ankle and along the line of the foot. Selvan immediately pulls his foot way. There is a broad, dull weal there, the mark of a beating. The Master must have whacked him with a thick stick.

Shortie rubs his own foot and ankle involuntarily. Deep inside he feels a stir of something. Something like a tiny glow of happiness. No, he tells himself.

"Why did he beat you?"

"That fellow doesn't need a reason. He beats. That's all. But I'm going to get him. I know the route that he takes to go home. I'll break his head one day, you wait and see..."

Shortie does not know what to say. He wants to change Selvan's mood, make him happy and light-hearted once again, but how? Will the mention of Veeran cheer him up?

"Master, you know Veeran's latest? The rascal is at Belly's she-goat these days. Today when I was not looking, he jumped on her and..."

"Your Veeran goes with Belly's goat, and you go with Belly..."

"Chi chi! What are you saying? I'm never going to tell you anything if you start this!"

"Angry, Shortie? Why? You're always with her. Why be shy? Even Stumpleg has lost out to you this time..."

Shortie's cheeks burn with pride.

"Come on, Master, it's nothing. You know I'm not like

Stumpleg, I don't stare at her like that. She talks nicely and I like her for that..."

"Dai, Shortie! Don't I know you? That bloody Stumpleg is simple, compared to you. But you're deep. Can't be trusted. You think I don't know what happened that day when you and Belly went to pluck fruit from the trees in the lakebed? Tallfellow told me everything..."

Shortie is irritated with Tallfellow. God knows when he told Selvan this. The rascal loves to get others into trouble, carries tales, talks nonsense... but even Tallfellow doesn't dare carry tales about Stumpleg. Stumpleg will beat him black and blue if he does.

Selvan finds Shortie's angry silence troubling. He grabs his face by the chin and turns it around to face him.

"Dai!"

Shortie smiles, pretending that he is not really bothered. He gets up and peers into the pen. Some of the goats are already down, their heads on the ground. A few stand around sniffling. A happy lot, he thinks. All they do is eat. Feed, sleep, feed. Not a care in the world.

He looks up at the sky. Now, there are a few clouds brushing past the aura of the moon. But they sail past it stealthily, not daring to disturb the moon's cold brightness that touches everything. The leaves of tall palms shine with a metallic hue. Shortie's eyes search out the toddy pots tucked into the leaves. There, they are—hanging down, like the breasts of some women that he has seen. Something stirs in him. He looks at Selvan, lying on his back on his cot.

"Master, want to drink toddy?"

Selvan sits up straight. His eyes open out wide. They are filled with want.

"Yes! Why not?"

Kandamoopan, the toddy-tapper, brings Shortie palm

juice some days. At least two or three bowls of it. Shortie drinks the stuff gratefully. It fills his stomach and lulls him into a happy haze. He feels sluggish for a while afterwards. Some days he does not like the ripe sweetness of the juice, but nevertheless drinks it up. It keeps him from feeling hungry. His tongue always yearns for the taste of toddy, but he is too scared to ask Kandamoopan. What if the old man tells his Gounder Master?

"My, my! Your royal arse wants to shit twice a day, both in the morning and afternoon?"

And then the Mistress is sure to add her own to the Master's angry retorts.

"The fellow will just get drunk and loll about and that's the end of our goats!" And then... thwack! He would be beaten.

Perhaps some day, Kandamoopan will offer him toddy on his own. As a gift. Everyday, Kandamoopan fills the Gounder's large toddy pail, kept especially for him at the cow pen, to drink at night when he is alone, guarding his cattle. Shortie has on occasion sipped at the pail, but never to his stomach's fill. The Gounder would know if he did that and then, again... thwack!

He hears the gurgling sound of toddy as it foams over. He recalls achingly the frothing toddy drops, speckled and bright, like a cat's eyes. A sip of the mildly sweet toddy and a lazy warmth fills the heart, and a quiet comfort stills the stomach. Poor Selvan! He has lived this long but does not know the taste of toddy. His father will certainly not let him have even a mouthful.

"What does a schoolboy like you want to do with this stuff?"

Shortie feels a gush of love for Selvan. He will like toddy. The moon, the palm trees swaying in the night wind and

the memory of toddy— he must somehow bring down at least one pot of toddy. But how, and in what? He looks around and sees his tin pail by the side of the hut, the same that he uses to carry food in the morning. In the nights he fills it with food for Poochi.

Selvan looks uneasy.

"Shortie, want to fill that thing with toddy?"

Shortie feels a prick of remorse. He and Selvan have been together every night for over three weeks but now...

"Why Master, you don't want to drink from this?"

"Why don't you bring down a whole pot from up the tree?"

He does not think it can be done. The pot is too heavy to carry and besides he has to put it back once they are done with it. He does not trust himself to climb up again after drinking toddy.

"No, Master. I can't climb up with a pot after drinking. Can't leave it lying about either. Kandamoopan will find out and tell your father."

"Alright. Take your pail, then."

Selvan's tone is tinged with disgust. Shortie looks around, wondering which tree he should choose. There are trees everywhere. Full-breasted trees that call out to him. Trees full of juice. Young trees in bud. A twisted tree that looks lame for some reason. Twin palms. A male tree beckons from near the Big Rock at the far end of the field. Not all trees would have toddy pots—only a few, and even these are sure to be hidden.

Shortie wonders if he should go for the juicy palm. It is a female tree and there are at least half-a-dozen pots tied into its leaves, some for toddy and others for the juice. He starts walking towards it. Selvan calls out to him.

"Dai! Not that! Go for a male tree."

Shortie grins to himself. Selvan sounds so knowing! But he is right, he thinks. Toddy from a male tree has a sharpness that is lovely on the tongue. And if the palm buds are fresh, it is even better. He looks for such a tree and finds one, standing by itself. A head of dried leaves and a cluster of green and yellow fronds. He gestures to Selvan to follow him and runs towards the tree. When he gets closer, he sees that it is very tall. Its leaves are edged with moonlight and very beautiful. The toddy pots are deep inside the fronds, soft mounds of shapely dusk.

"Shortie! Think this is a good one?"

"Sure. Lovely stuff, clear, sweet and sharp. Your grandmother's type of toddy."

"Alright, go up then."

Shortie pulls his towel off his head, twists it into a band and ties it around his ankles. This is to help him rest his weight, when he starts climbing. Then he takes his pail and fastens it to his hip-string. He staggers to the palm. Putting his hands on both sides of its trunk and keeping his chest away from its rough front, he holds tight and starts climbing. Hardly has he climbed a few metres, when he hears the sound of cloth tearing. His feet flounder and fly apart. Shortie is alarmed. What to do now? He shinnies down and stands staring at the torn towel. It is a frayed piece of fabric and he should have known that it will tear.

Selvan bounds down from a nearby rock.

"Now what?"

"Towel tore..."

"Forget it, take off your loincloth and use that to climb..."

Stung, Shortie turns an angry face to Selvan. He has his back to the moon and his face appears dark in shadow. He hears Selvan cackle. He looks at the towel in his hands,

tears it into bits and flings it away from him.

"Hey, Shortie! Don't be angry. Come on, take off your loincloth."

"Then go away from here. You can't watch me climb without anything on. Go wait for me by the pen."

"What's all this? Like a girl! Don't be silly. I'll be here, but I won't look!"

Shortie takes off his loincloth and once more fashions a band out of it. This time he is more than careful when he climbs. This piece of cloth is not strong either and he does not want it to tear. Using his hands he climbs up and up. The tree is still. The wind has died down for the moment. When the wind is in the tree, the tree bends in half, as if it will snap into two.

When he is halfway up, Shortie rests his chest against the tree trunk and moves up swiftly. The pail tied to his hip knocks against the trunk and makes a rasping sound that shatters the quiet of the night. He peers up and looks for where the palm's dry leaves have been hacked off—the pots are in that dark hollow. He searches for a strong frond and finds one just above him. Holding on to it he pulls himself up and sits on another tough looking frond. It feels funny to be sitting naked. He has to be careful too. A palm thorn stings and if one pricked him, he would hurt for days. He unwinds the band from his feet, wraps it around his hips and leans back.

He sees the entire field below him. Wide, with knots of palm trees growing out of its stomach. The field is a giantess, he thinks and the trees are her many hands. The lakebed is a dull white. Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's fields are mere dots. The sky above dares him to touch it. And still the moon continues to pour out its white and yellow happiness.

Holding on to the knife-edged frond at his side, he heaves

himself up. Now he is taller than the tree. Not short. Not Shortie. He sees the field through the leaves and fronds. He wants to stretch his hands out and fly. Float on the night air, slide down a moonbeam, swim the expanse of the sky... and then maybe fall down into the snug hands of the waiting giantess. His hands tighten their grip on the frond.

He thinks he hears Selvan shouting at him from the rock. His eyes look for the rock—there it is, a black bedspread, all crumpled up. And is that Selvan? He looks like a bird, a stringy crane. He wants to laugh, laugh loudly so that Selvan can hear him. Selvan must be afraid to be alone.

"You bastard! What are you doing up there?"

"Patience, Master. Haven't got my grip on things here..."

"Hurry up!"

Shortie's nose twitches, feeling the fragrant toddy in the pots. Perhaps Selvan can smell the stuff too. Which is why he wants it fast. Let him wait. Wait and suffer for it. He bends down and looks at the pots. They have been tied to the fronds, at the exact spot where the buds open and put out their juice. He searches and finds the ropes that hold the pots to the frond. He unties one of the ropes and picks up a pot. Not full. By dawn it should fill up to the brim. He blows away the ants and insects that float about on the surface and carefully pours out a portion of toddy into his pail. He leaves the pot half-full. He does not want Kandamoopan to get suspicious. Now for another pot.

He stops to take a sip from the pail. As he leans his head back to pour the toddy down his throat, his eyes alight on Tiruchengode hill. His heart feels tremulous.

"Sami! Sengottaiah Sami! Forgive me if I've done wrong. Only you can see me now!"

Tiruchengode hill is a long-coiled snake that has thrust its head up and stands proud. The head of the snake is in

Shortie's face. He turns away. The hill is sacred to the god Murugan and people in the village do not dare to sleep with their feet in its direction. To show one's feet to the hill is to insult it. And to insult it is to spite the god.

He lifts the pail to his mouth again. He has his back to Selvan and finds it difficult to hold himself in the wedge between frond and branch and drink. Ideally he would have liked to move to another frond, but it is not easy to bend and crawl across. He drains a little more of the toddy into his throat. Clear, light toddy. Not a hint of sourness yet. Sweet, but not cloying. He drinks up the entire pail and feels his stomach go cool. He wants more, wants his belly to fill up. His hand reaches out for another pot. He burps. Maybe he should let the toddy settle before he drinks again.

Meanwhile Selvan waits. He shouts, his patience all but gone. He cannot really see Shortie, but he knows that he is up to something, knows that he is drinking without bringing down the toddy for him.

"Dai!"

"Yes, Master..."

His tone betrays irritation. He does not want to be hurried. He wants to drink slowly, carefully. He takes a few more sips from the pail. Holding the pail to his stomach, he wonders if he should worry about Selvan at all. Why bother? Why be afraid of Selvan? All he can do is shout up to him, talk nonsense. Toddy is not all that different from palm juice, he decides. Not at all. He hears Selvan calling. He rolls his fist into a hollow and hoots down at a thoroughly annoyed Selvan. Shortie knows that to hoot is to insult, but he does not care. And besides, Selvan cannot see him. He continues to hoot for a while.

"Motherfucker! Come down. Down, you rascal..."

What can the fellow do? Let him shout. Shortie drinks a

little more. Drink a bit, rest, drink some more...

Selvan shouts at him again.

"Chakkili bastard! Naked son of a..."

Shortie wants to stay there on top of the palm tree forever. He wants the moonlight to linger, the trees and fields to stay as they are now, tinged with the rays of the waxing moon. And he wants Selvan down there, grunting like a pig, to run round and round the palm, looking for him, Shortie.

"Dai, look! If you don't climb down this very minute, I'll tell my father and Kandamoopan..."

Selvan is angry but Shortie is unmoved. Selvan has threatened him before, several times. But he cannot really sneak on Shortie without being scolded himself. Wasn't he equally in it? "No fear, never fear", mutters Shortie and then laughs. A loud, long peal of laughter echoes around the hills and then stops abruptly. As if in a dream, his hands search for another pot and pour its contents into the pail. His mouth feels itchy. An ant must have stung him.

"Bastard! Shortie! Get down here!"

With his head bobbing up and down in rage, Selvan seems a garden lizard to Shortie. Shortie laughs again, this time loudly and lustily. It fills the fields, rebounds on the hills and holds the air. As if a million Shorties have gathered around Selvan to laugh at him. Selvan is by now taut with rage. He picks up a stone and aims it at Shortie. It hits the tree midway and falls down. Shortie smiles to himself. Selvan aims another stone, this time more carefully. It sails up and snicks a frond's edge, dropping down on the far side of the tree. Shortie wraps himself into a cluster of fronds. They feel like a fan of hands, protecting him from the savage bird below. Selvan the beaky bird. Crow-like.

Selvan spins around the field looking for more stones. Not all the stones sail up to reach the fronds.

"Master, stop! Stop! I'm coming down."

Saying this, he looks at the pail. Nearly full, should do for Selvan. He screws the lid of the pail back onto it and prepares to come down. He does not care to look and see if he has secured the pots back carefully. As he stands up, his head spins. His feet feel loose and light. He must do this carefully, come down slowly. One foot in the wrong place, or in the air, and he would be done for. And when down, he must somehow give Selvan the slip and flee, run, go far away. Selvan will surely try to beat him, come at him like a hungry dog, a sniffing graveyard dog.

Shortie removes his loincloth, once again winds it into a band and slips it around his ankles. He hitches the pail to his hip-string and starts coming down. Just then a sharp stone stabs his back and drops away with a thud. Shortie winces but muffles a deep-throated scream. He holds onto the tree trunk and waits. He must not let go. But what if Selvan throws another stone? Will he be able to bear that shooting pain again?

"Master. One more stone and I'll throw the pail down. You'll see."

The threat has its effect.

"Alright. Come down fast."

Shortie comes down slowly but when he is about four feet from the ground, Selvan runs and holds his hand out for the pail, almost snatching it from Shortie. And having got it, he does not even wait to sit down, or go back to his perch on the rock. He starts drinking deeply.

Shortie laughs.

"Master! Remember I sipped from the same pail..."

"Shut up! Naked dog! Where's your loincloth?"

Shortie disentangles his feet from his loincloth and ties it around his hip again. He has not stopped smiling. Now

and then the smile twists into a sneer, and changes shape into a screeching laugh.

"What the hell are you laughing for?"

Selvan stops drinking for a moment and stares at Shortie. Shortie does not answer. He laughs even more loudly. Louder and louder, as if he were laughing his insides out. He runs, holds on to the tree and laughs.

Now they are almost near the pen and Shortie has still not stopped laughing. The goats look alarmed, and scatter around the pen. Startled, Poochi, tied to the pen, barks. Selvan is besides himself with frustration and rage. He plucks a piece of dried palm frond from the thatched roof and flings it at Shortie. It falls flat on the ground and lies still, pleading innocence. This makes Shortie laugh all the more.

"Still find it funny?"

Selvan aims a hard kick at Shortie with his right leg. Shortie falls down but is up almost at once. He holds onto his stomach and continues to laugh.

"Leftovers-eating dog! Why do you laugh? Tell me!"

Selvan grabs Shortie by his hair and throws him down again. Shortie picks himself up and starts running around the pen. Selvan runs after him and manages to get hold of the trailing tail of his loincloth. He pulls it off Shortie's hips and frenziedly throws it across the fields. Shortie turns around and reaching for Selvan's shorts, starts pulling at them. Selvan bends down and tries to keep his shorts from falling. He has a time of it for, with every pull, the shorts nearly come off and he has to hitch them up. By then Shortie is at it again. His hands do not appear to tire of this game.

Selvan gives up after a while.

Eleven

The pen is a large one, halfway down a plot of land. There is goat shit everywhere. Shortie and Selvan are together all the time now, happy to be in the fields, rolling in the mud. Every day they think up a plan, plot an adventure. Memories of the night before or expectations of the night to come fill the long afternoon hours when they are apart. Shortie talks of nothing else to Belly these days. He pursues her with his night-tales till she is fed up and asks him to keep his stories to himself. He does not mind. He is excited —the fields lie invitingly before him, broad swathes of land that he is happy to roam at night, without fear.

It is the time of the waning moon. An early hour of the night, when they cannot see each other for the darkness that holds all things captive. But they talk in soft tones, breaking into loud laughter now and then, glad that at least they can hear each other in the even pitch of dusk that lies between them. All evening Shortie has been roaming the fields looking for palm fruit. He has collected over ten of them. He points to his sack.

"Master, see, I've brought you the best fruits there are. Choose some and I'll roast them for you."

His mouth watering, Selvan bends down and picks out the fruits that are fat and black. He wishes he had the lantern from inside the pen. He needs more light to choose. But Shortie does not like to mess about in the night with a lamp. To him, a lamp is for the indoors, to be hung over a bed, to light the pen where the goats are herded. He does not like it in the open, near his sack.

Selvan has asked him several times if he is not afraid of snakes biting him.

"What snakes? Look, our god of Tiruchengode hill won't let us down!"

Shortie knows that snakes do not haunt empty fields, where there is nothing for them to eat. They love to lie and glide around in the coolness of the lakebed. He is not worried about insects either. He can make out things moving in the dark, and the lights that flicker on Tiruchengode hill ease his mind. They are enough to keep strange creatures away. If, for some reason, the lights on the hill don't come on, he feels cheated, abandoned. Selvan teases him about the lights. Does he really believe they illuminate his patch of the fields?

"You'll know when the lights don't come on. You'll know how dark it really is, Master."

Shortie picks up armfuls of dried palm fronds from around the pen and drops them in a heap in front of it. He takes out a matchbox from the inner roll of his head towel and lights a dry frond's edge. It catches fire at once. He covers the leaping flames with a bigger frond. It contains the flames. When the fire starts to burn steadily, he drops four palm fruits on the frond.

The red of the fire forms a rim of light around the pen. The light slips through the bamboo slats and make the goats' eyes smolder. It is warm and cozy, especially since a slightly damp wind has set in. Selvan draws himself closer. By now the fire burns easily. Shortie is intent on the flames: he turns the fruits over, adds more leaves...

Suddenly the skin of a palm fruit cracks and splits. Its juice spills into the fire with a loud hiss. The fruits must be done. Shortie piles on more leaves. The flame is steady now and long. It stays upright for a while and then slowly dies down. And once again the dark catches up with them. Shortie pokes at the fruits with a stick and seeing they are done, rolls them out one by one. They have to cool.

A goat bleats, as if in pain.

"Dai, what is it?"

"Don't know, Master."

"The goat wants you? Why, isn't Veeran in there? Won't do for her, is it?"

"How do you know she's calling out to me?"

"Don't I? Listen, isn't she saying, 'Shortie! Shortie!'?"

"Master, do you think I'm like that? Like Stumpleg?"

He laughs and so does Selvan. Selvan stretches out on the cot and Shortie joins him. They lie, looking at the sky. The sky is a blue-black expanse and there are not many stars. Scanning the sky for the evening star, Shortie murmurs:

"Must fill three sacks at least. With palm nuts. It's that time of the year..."

"Should we start right away Shortie? Tomorrow?"

"No Master, let's wait. For a week or ten days. Let them ripen a little more."

"Think these are ready to eat now?"

Shortie gets up from the cot and feels the fruits. Warm but not hot. He taps a fruit thoughtfully and then splits it open. His fingers burn with the heat stored inside the fruit-flesh. He places the peeled fruit on the ground. Then he hands Selvan a piece. Selvan gets his teeth into it, and uses his mouth to fight off the tough palm fibre that gets in the way. Like Poochi with a piece of flesh, thinks Shortie. He picks out a portion of the fruit for himself.

"Lovely. From which tree?"

"That one there. Always ripens early. Fruits like big-bottomed pots. They are the first to fall."

They continue to suck at the juice of the roasted palm fruit greedily. They don't want to waste any of it. Shortie is working through his second fruit, Selvan is on his third. Shortie is not sure if Selvan knows how to get at the last

ounce of juice in a fruit. He is almost done with his, but still he does not have the heart to throw away the rind. He examines the ravaged fruit. He has eaten away the flesh on both sides of the rind, in fact his teeth have sawed right down the middle of the fruit. Satisfied, he throws it away. It falls down—a knot of fibres, like an old woman's head. A wise white head, with its white hair oiled and combed.

"I'm done, Master. Don't think I can manage anymore."

"Done? Why did you roast all ten then?"

Selvan is done as well. Shortie wipes his fingers on his head towel and stays seated on the cot. The goat bleats once again. Shortie listens keenly this time. This is no mating call, he knows that. This is the cry of a goat in pain. A short, pained bleat. He peers into the pen but cannot make out which goat it is. He waits until he hears the bleat again and realises that the goat is probably on the far side of the pen. He hears a rustle and then sees her—a goat ploughing through the herd in pain. He jumps up and rushes into the pen. Selvan yells from the cot.

"Shortie! Careful of snakes!"

Shortie is amongst the goats. In the dim light of the overhead lantern he sees a she-goat standing against the fence, her body pressed against the bamboo. She is hunched, staring at the earth below. Shortie stoops down, rubs her back gently, and fondles her neck. She looks at him, with pain in her eyes. He feels her swollen belly. Two months pregnant, maybe. Or has she merely fed well? He is not sure.

He decides to call Selvan. Cursing Shortie, he comes in and stops short.

"Swollen, her belly is swollen."

Maybe because a garden lizard went over her. If he taps the swollen part gently with a slipper, the goat should be fine. Shortie picks up Selvan's slipper and goes at the goat a

few times with it. First stomach, then back, tail... each time he brings the slipper down, he makes a gesture as if he were taking something off the goat.

No use. The goat continues to bleat sadly. Has she chewed on a poisonous bush? If she has, there is nothing he can do. If Stumpleg was here, he would know how to cure a goat that has eaten a poisonous leaf. Should he go and fetch him? But it would mean going down the lakebed and walking up over the other side. Shortie shivers—a line of fear creeps up his back. If he can persuade Selvan to stay alone, then he can run across the dry waterway and fetch the Gounder. But will Selvan agree? Or should Selvan go? But the Gounder would not want that.

"Who do you think you are? Sending my son off like that, while you sit tight?"

Maybe he should just pray. Pray that nothing bad should happen to the goat. Pray to Munisami, to the god of Tiruchengode, to the mother goddess at the edge of the village... pray…

"Shortie, do you think we should cut its ear and see?"

Selvan too is worried now. He brings the lantern down from the wall and closer to the goat. The creature appears terrified and stiff. She stands still, with only her tail moving from time to time. Shortie wonders if he should do as Selvan tells him to—slice a bit of the goat's ear off to see if her blood is curdled with poison. But how to do it? He looks around. No blade or sickle. He curses himself. He should keep one here, for nights such as this. Selvan bends down and holds the goat close, as if to soothe her. She stays still for a while and then, without warning, leaps from his hands and bounds away from him. Thrown off balance, he falls down into a mess of goat shit. The goat runs round and round the pen, as if struck by a whip, letting out a loud, long scream.

"Shit! Shortie! What's this? Is it possessed?"

"Poor thing, Master. She's in pain."

Shortie keeps his eyes on the goat as she circles around the pen. His eyes fix on a wedge of rock in the field outside that sticks out as a lump in the dark. He knows that rock. It is the one on which Kandamoopan heaps all the palm fronds, thorns and leaves that he brings down from the trees he climbs to place toddy pots. He pushes past Selvan and runs towards the rock.

"Dai, where are you going?"

He hears Selvan squealing after him. What a crybaby. Can't stay alone for even a minute. Tearing through the dark, cutting a path through it, he runs until he reaches the rock heaped high with the fronds, leaves and bark of the palm. He feels around the pile and finds what he is looking for—palm thorns. Holding them carefully, he runs back to the pen.

"Bloody Shortie! You could have told me where you were going."

"For the palm thorn. Scared?"

"Scared? Who's scared?"

Shortie is now inside the pen. He examines the palm thorns he has brought by the lamplight. He chooses one that is sharp-edged. He hands it over to Selvan and searches for the goat. He gently cajoles her to where Selvan is and holds her tight. He hands Selvan the thorn.

"Here. Saw away a bit of her ear."

Selvan's hand shakes.

"I'll hold her. You do it."

Shortie runs the thorn over a patch of ear and scratches at it. The goat jumps wildly.

"Hold her tight, Master!"

He works on the scarred ear until he gets a bit of it off. The goat is now uncontrollable. Shortie cuts a little more of

the ear, a long gash. Blood oozes out. Not poisoned, then. He pulls the thorn back and Selvan lets go of the goat. Relieved but still frightened, she shoots to the other end of the pen and then runs back.

They come out and lie down on the cot once more. All is quiet and then the goat screams again. They sit up and see her running in circles. After a while, her legs buckle and she lies sprawling on her back, her legs flailing. After a brief while, she violently turns over and, with her face to the ground, kicks her legs in the air.

Shortie feels something loosen inside him.

"Nothing to worry, Master. It's that wretched gut-flea."

The gut-flea is harmless but it can drive a goat to madness. It gets in through the anus and irritates the animal's insides. After a while, though, the goat does get rid of it. Shortie sighs. He wants to sleep now.

He hears the goat wail now and then. But now all he wants is for the starless night to close in on him. A solitary crow on a palm lets out a deep caw. He feels the darkness pressing down on his eyes. He turns over and lets his limbs turn light and limp. Like a small bird's thrumming, Selvan's murmurs dip in and out of his ear, until they die into a buzz. Then the buzz recedes too and there is nothing left but the emptiness of the night.

A wind on the rise tries to wake him as he lies snugly in the peaceful dark. He feels it as a damp tap on his back. And then it is all over him, washing off the day's heat. He glides into deeper sleep, and still the wind continues to rock him. Gently, joyously. But not for long. All of a sudden, it gathers speed, whirls about, and hurls down on his sleeping frame and then retreats only to strike again—like a bouncing ball that has a momentum of its own.

The wind is its own person. It blows gleefully across the

flat fields, glad that neither tree nor bush lies in its path. It snuggles up the palm and disturbs the leaves. The palms sway while their leaves rustle like dancing bells. Content, the wind retires into the lakebed, cuffing awake the sleeping bushes and disturbing the watchful trees.

Shortie hears the wind in the woods. He turns over and continues to sleep. Selvan is curled into his blanket and very still. He needs a blanket, no matter how hot the night. Unlike Shortie, who sleeps with his chest to the skies even when the night is chill and damp. The wind howls as it lifts dried leaves off the ground, flinging them away and returning to batter the tops of trees.

Shortie stirs. Exhausted by the day's labours, his body is glad to be held captive by sleep.

The wind gives up, dies down. Darkness sits, tight and compact like it has been stuffed into a box. It returns, a stronger wind this time, and bolder. It moans, wails and beats down on the sleeping earth like an army let loose from the heavens. It digs into the soil and gives flight to clumps of mud and sand. It wants to unhouse the earth, break the land into pieces. And when it finds it cannot, the wind turns in on itself, and rakes up dust in the scuffle. It is a giant catapult, flinging sand from the sky followed by balls of mud.

Stunned awake by a blow that strikes his face, Shortie sits up. Was it the Gounder? He tries to open his eyes but finds he cannot. Rimmed with sleep and fatigue, they remain tightly shut. He forces his eyelids open, rubs his eyes till they are clear and dusts the mud off his face. He sees the wind press down on the fence around the pen. The goats are all up now and bleating in fear. Where is the wind blowing from?

A kid lets out a high-pitched scream. Shortie sits with his head buried in his knees. He is now fully awake.

Something is wrong. But what? Lightning flashes across the fields and in that brief moment of its lasting, he sees the wind for the fury that it is—it slams down hard on the bamboo fence, nearly tearing it off the ground.

It is the mid-July wind that stops at nothing, as if it does not care if things are laid low or destroyed. Shortie smiles, thinking of how the wind almost rolled him and his sack off the cot. He stands up and stretches. He wonders if it will rain. Just then, lightning bares the sky and he sees huge swarming black clouds overhead.

A fat raindrop falls on his chest. Good, good if it rains. The rain will stop the wind from carrying out its mischief. He looks at Selvan sleeping fitfully and decides not to wake him. But he must go now and make sure that the fence around the pen is held down tight. Check the ropes that hold the bamboo slats together and re-knot them to their pegs. He gets up and goes around the pen.

The eastern fence is fine, pegged as it is to a big rock. The southern fence is a bit weak, held in place only by a post sunk into the earth. He remembers there are stones near the western fence. He runs and tries to lift one of them. The stone remains stuck to the ground. He has to be careful. There might be scorpions under the stones. He decides to wait until lightning strikes again, so that he can see what he is doing. He stands with his back to the wind, feeling it as a thrashing whip. This is a man-eating wind, he thinks, a wind that will surely bring rain.

Soon the stone is rolled back. Nothing underneath there. With some effort he hauls it back and walks back to the southern fence. He unties the rope from the post and tries to tie it to the stone instead. Even as the rope loosens, the wind blows the fence inwards, threatening to tip it down. He has to work hard to hold the fence back against the force of the wind. He waits for a lull in the wind's blowing, and when

it comes, swiftly slips the rope around the stone. He secures it tight and drags the stone as far as possible, until the fence stands taut and straight.

He does the same with the western and northern fences —untangling the ropes and securing them tightly to stones that he picks up and arranges around the pen. He is glad that the wind has not got any stronger. He wonders why he did not plan for this before. In the future, he must make sure to re-knot the ropes before mid-July. Tired from carrying the stones, he sinks down next to Selvan's cot, resting his back against one of its legs. The cot creaks in protest.

The wind is on the rise again and comes at him, as if it is a wild beast, and he its prey. The sky is shrouded with clouds. He wants it to rain. He looks up at Tiruchengode hill. Comforted by the lights twinkling on it, he raises his hands over his head and starts praying.

"We are alone, god, all alone in this orphaned field. How can we stand up against the wind and rain? Please hold them back. God, hold yourself back."

He repeats "hold yourself back" as if it were a chant, many times over. The goats are now gathered in a tight circle beneath the stilts that hold up the hut. They bleat loudly each time the wind crashes down on the fence. He shivers as big fat raindrops fall on his back. More, he mutters, more. If the wind is to be laid low, if the dust storm it has set up has to subside, it has to rain. Rain, rain, he commands. He must not let Selvan sleep anymore. Will he yell because he was not woken up earlier? Or will he be scared of the galloping wind?

"Master, get up. Now..."

Shortie shakes him by the shoulder, but Selvan sleeps on. Exasperated he pulls at his blanket. Selvan sits up with a start.

"What's this wind, Shortie?"

Selvan's half-open eyes are filled with fear.

"Don't be scared. Its the mid-July wind that brings rain."

The wind whirls about in huge circles, as if it is swirling the world around. Suddenly it dies down—only to spin out again, a huge moan, a scream that echoes in the hills and dissolves in the sky. Selvan stands up, clutching his blanket around him. He folds his cot.

"Let's take it into the hut, Shortie. Don't think it'll be safe here!"

It rains, large drops of rain, but the wind smashes and disperses them. Tiny raindrops cling to the boys' backs as they stand, unsure of what to do. Shortie does not think the wind will cease even if rains. It seems to love the rain, and wants to burst through the reluctant pouring from the sky.

"Forget it, Master. Don't even try getting into the pen. Let's take the cot to the twin palm."

They lift the cot and start walking towards the tree. The rogue wind tumbles on the cot and tries to snatch it from them. They press on, braving its mighty rush. It taunts them, flogs their backs, yet they walk on. When the wind comes straight at them, they stand still, and when it retreats, they run a few yards ahead. They are finally near the tree. They secure the cot to its trunk, tying it up with the dried palm fibre that lies all around. Relieved that the wind is blowing against the cot and pushing it towards the tree trunk, they run back to the pen. The wind nearly lifts them off the ground and carries them forward.

It is raining heavily now. Rain and wind thrash their backs in succession. They hear thunder rolling off a faraway hill and feel it fall as a thud in their hearts. They call out to the rain god, asking him to smite the wind. They call to the god of thunder, so that a thunderbolt does not strike them.

They cannot pray, only entreat in fear. Their cries are lost in the frightened bleats that issue from the pen.

They try to lift the bamboo poles to get into the pen, but the wind does not let them. Selvan holds the poles tight, just so that Shortie can get in. Once he is inside, Shortie holds up the poles, while Selvan slips through. They are now completely wet. The goats continue to bleat pathetically.

Held back at the fence, the wind is tired and broken now. Yet it staggers in, not wanting to give up. They huddle under the stilts, along with the goats. A newly born kid calls out from the knot of goat legs that clutter the pen. Where is it? It is hard to peer through the tangle of goat bodies all around them. Finally, Shortie sees it and manages to pull it to him. He holds it close against his chest. The goats look abject, shrunk into a circle of their own bodies. Selvan and Shortie sit down and stare through the bamboo slats that make up the fence.

The wind and rain are fighting it out. The wind wants to stop the rain, stem the flow of waters from the sky. But the rain is heavy now, a downpour that does not want to be defeated by the rascally wind. As lightning flashes, Shortie sees the earth struggling to hold itself against the night's fury. He is glad that he re-pegged the fence. If he had not done that, it would have come down by now and left them naked in the face of the tumbling wind and rain. He is not so worried about the rain. The land is dry. It has laid in wait for a long time. It is a thirsty hot earth, ready to drink its fill. But the wind worries him. A vengeful wind, wreaking havoc for god knows what wrong we have done it.

"Dai, Shortie, will the cot be safe?"

Who cares? Why is he so worried about his cot, when here we are with the goats, alone in the wind and rain? Here I am worrying about this pen, this hut and all he can think of is his cot. I want the wind to carry his precious cot

off and dash it against a rock. Or haul it like a corpse on its back and hurl it into the lakebed. God, let the twin palm not save his cot.

Shortie feels his mind go wild but he does not reply. His eyes remain fixed on the fence and the ropes. He is not too afraid of the fence falling, but is not so sure about the hut. He looks up and sees that the top of it has already gone awry, and stands tilted. Even as he watches, the wind tears out a piece of thatch. Rain floods the hut.

Shortie dumps the kid into Selvan's arms and holds the bamboo frame of the hut down. No use. The wind is too strong, a heavy gust he cannot fend off. He calls to Selvan to put the kid down and help him. He cannot do this on his own. Selvan drops the kid and rushes to help Shortie. It bleats in terror and stumbles into the herd.

They soon realise it is of no use. The thatch at the sides has peeled off, and soon woven bits of thatch come clattering down, falling on the goats and around them. Shortie feels there is nothing more he can do. He has never been in such a situation before. Should he and Selvan run away from the pen and save themselves? But what about the goats, those poor mites? What about them? On the other hand, they cannot hold onto the frame of the hut forever. Selvan's hands must hurt too.

Shortie loosens his hold on the frame and the wind swoops down, felling the hut completely. The boys scream and the goats with them, and for a moment the loud swoosh of the wind is lost in their shouting. They are now given to the rain and wind. The hut's sides lie flat across the bamboo fence, which is now bent. But the fence is still in place, the ropes that hold it up are not loose. But if the frame gathers water and presses down heavily on the it, the fence might collapse too. Shortie motions to Selvan.

"Hurry! Jump over the fence."

Selvan tries to jump over and before he realises it, finds himself thrown to the ground on the other side. Shortie holds the kid over the fence.

"Here, catch!"

Bewildered and scared, Selvan looks up, and in a flash of lightning sees the wet and miserable kid. He holds his hand out for it. Shortie waits until the wind dips and retreats, then jumps over the fence. As he lands, a sharp pain shoots down his thigh. Shortie keeps to the side of the fence and feels his way to his sack. He brings it back to where Selvan stands with the bleating kid and covers his head with it. He pulls the rest of the sack over his own back. They sit down against the fence with their backs to the wind. The wind rips through Shortie's naked body and down his back. Selvan holds the kid close to his heart.

Even as they sit, Shortie's eyes see it happening.

The wind has worked its way through the ropes that hold the bamboo slats. In a minute the slats are at the wind's mercy. It lifts them off the ground and carries them far into the distance. In those flashing moments when lightning strikes the earth, the boys watch in amazement as the wind chases the fence away, part by part. Like magic, thinks Shortie.

The rain. The keening wind and thunder. And lightning. Shortie wonders about the goats. Have they run away with the wind? He does not think they are in the pen, or where the pen was, anymore. He is sure that they are not under the felled hut frame and thatch. These are still there, and there is no bleating from under them.

Selvan suddenly gets up and starts running towards the twin palm. Clutching the kid to him, he pushes his way through the wind. Shortie runs after him and drags him down and they both sit in the open field. Shortie holds himself tight and small. Selvan drops the kid into Shortie's

lap and puts his hands around his shoulders. He howls and weeps. Louder and louder. Sobs rack his stricken and cold body. Shortie hugs Selvan to himself.

"There, there, it'll soon be over. Soon."

Selvan cries even more and buries his head in Shortie's lap. Burdened by the two creatures in his small skinny lap, Shortie looks up. The rain is steady now. Lots and lots of it. The wind appears to be dying down. Looking up at the sky, he feels a surge of joy. Selvan digs himself deeper into Shortie's lap. Shortie's hand tightens around him. Wind, rain and lightning dance all around them to a steady rhythm.

Shortie feels himself a raindrop, bouncing off the wind and falling to the earth.

Twelve

Shortie wakes up with a start and rubs his head. He looks around but sees nothing. Yet he knows something has fallen on him. Perhaps it is a palm fruit ripened to a nut. He sits up. The sky is glowing with the muted white of the late night moon. A few stars are about, like scattered white corn. He listens carefully. Not a sound anywhere. Not even the buzz of insects. The goats are quiet in the pen, a study in stillness. They are done with chewing cud. Time for them to shit now. But even that, they do quietly. The black pellets just drop off them, littering the ground on which they sleep. Selvan's cot lies in the pen's shadow. Swathed in his sheet, Selvan is a lumpy shape in the half-light.

Shortie knows that he won't be able to sleep. The sun is nowhere near the top of Tiruchengode hill. It won't appear for some time. He wishes Selvan would get up. But he won't unless he is shaken awake. Every morning, Shortie is up with the birds of dawn, when they call from the faraway tamarind trees on the road leading to the village. He has to make it to the cow pen before the grey hour gives way to light. Even if he is late by a few minutes, the Gounder scolds and complains.

Selvan of course sleeps through the early morning hours. Lucky fellow, thinks Shortie, standing up and stretching. Poochi looks up from its sand pit and growls softly.

"Alright, it's me."

He walks a little away from where Selvan sleeps and pisses. Just then he hears it again, the sound of something falling, a wet, thumpy sound. As if someone has thrown a ball of fresh cowdung against a wall. His heart skips a beat or two and he cocks his right ear in the direction of the

lakebed. Another palm nut? He wonders from which tree it has fallen. There are at least two in the bed whose nuts are ripe enough to drop down. The pot palm and the red palm. The red palm bears nuts that are as red as ripe gherkins and as small. They usually fall one after the other. This must be the pot palm, he thinks. The nuts on this tree fall rarely. First one, and then only days later, does a second nut come down. Each of these is large, bigger than the cup of his hand.

He wants to run and gather the fallen nuts. Should he wake Selvan ? Something thuds down again, this time from the east. As if a stone has been dropped into a deep well. What tree is that, wonders Shortie? He leans back against the fence and stretches out on his sack. He shivers. A slight chill has set in.

He looks up. The moon is a faraway glow of light, rimmed by a misty aura. There is mist everywhere, and he fears it may not rain. Mist, it is said, keeps away the rain. It did rain a few days ago allowing the farmers to turn over the dry red earth. With the first rain the soil becomes ruddy and loose, and is ready to take the seeds the farmers would soon sow. But for the sowing to start, it has to rain again, at least once. When it is seeding time, the goat pen shifts back to its usual place near the Gounder's home.

Almost mid-August and still it hasn't rained its fill this season. He turns and peers into the pen. A few goats are up and scratching the ground with their feet. He rummages under his sack, finds his towel and ties it around his head. An owl hoots from a distance. Thud! Another fruit? The owl hoots again. It must have hunted all night and found nothing. Plok! This time, the sound is from near the Big Rock.

He has been up for a while now and already four to five nuts have fallen. It is a windless night, holding itself tautly against the dense air. So how have the fruits fallen? Is this

the work of spirits? The Old Gounder has warned him that around this time of the year, when the palm fruit ripens into nut, spirits roam about. They are known to sit on trees, on top of the nuts and plan mischief. Drawn by the smell of human flesh, they are wickedly playful. These are spirits of the night. At the stroke of dawn, when the cock crows, they hurry back to their dark and horrible hideouts. They dare not torment and trick at that hour. They leave those who are up and about alone—men on their way to work, with sacks on their backs, ready to start the day.

At times though spirits are known to wake people up, just before the dawning hour. Then they get up to all sorts of tricks. Like making nuts fall. But if a man is to go looking for the fallen nuts, he finds nothing. And of course, he looks around, wondering if he has come to the right tree. Just then, a nut drops—somewhere behind his back. He turns and runs towards that sound. Nothing. He waits, wonders. A nut drops again, he runs, finds nothing. What is a man to do? The spirits are not easy to tackle, especially when a man is alone.

Shortie is not so sure if the sound of nuts falling is a good omen. He is glad he remembered the Gounder's advice. What if he had gone after the nuts and left Selvan alone? Sometimes, spirits are known to get angry, just like that, for no reason at all, and slap a person on his face until he bleeds.

He listens, his ears on the alert. Nothing. Have the spirits read his thoughts? Shortie curls into his sack and fingers the charm on his hip-string for comfort. It is a very old charm, one that his mother found for him. That was when he was very ill and she took him to a mosque of Allah. A bearded Muslim healer chanted over this piece of metal and gave it to his mother, who tied it to his string. He has had it since then. As long as he holds onto this enchanted piece, no

spirit can do anything to him.

"Dai! Dai!"

It is Selvan, shaking him with triumphant glee.

"Dai! What's this? Sleeping like this! Are you dead or what..."

Shortie looks up. The sun is just over Tiruchengode hill, a shining bronze orb, shedding light over the hill slopes. It is only a little past dawn, he consoles himself. The moon is still there, in the western sky. A three-quarter moon. He looks into the pen. A she-goat stands, feeding her young.

"Eat less at night, Shortie, and you'll be up at first light. What a tight-arsed sleeper you are!"

"Don't go on, Master. For once in your life you're up early and you've started to boast... do you know what happened last night..."

Shortie tells him the tale of the spirits and the palm nuts, and how he did not let the spirits fool him. He does not want to scare Selvan, only to get his own back at him for teasing him. Selvan appears a bit wary but not too frightened. He will still go nut gathering, of that Shortie is sure.

He gets up and picks up his sack. And the rain-sack, which is nothing but a big plastic bag that he uses to cover his head when it rains. He hands it to Selvan. Shortie also grabs a stout neem branch resting against the fence and gestures to Poochi. The dog comes running. He fondles its ears before letting it go and starts to walk towards the Big Rock, motioning to Selvan to join him. Halfway to the Rock he stops short.

"Master, your slippers..."

"Should I?"

"Yes, you must wear them."

Selvan returns, wearing his slippers. Together they walk

towards the Big Rock and then turn right to reach the mud bank that rises up from the lakebed. Shortie walks briskly, tapping his stick smartly on the ground to announce his presence to snakes, scorpions and others who may be around. They are sure to scurry away at the knock-knock of his neem. Selvan follows Shortie, keeping a few yards behind him.

They walk down the slope to the lakebed and to the pot palm. A big black nut sits squat underneath it. Shortie taps at the nut with his stick, picks it up and hugs it to himself. It smells wonderful, warm and fragrant. A giant nut, with three parts to it and a luscious skin. It is this fruit he must have heard fall in the night. But he is glad he did not come then, that would have been frightening. The other nuts too must have fallen at about the same time. He graciously hands over his find to Selvan who right away puts it in his plastic bag. Today they are going to have a time of it, picking and storing nuts in their sacks. Who knows, maybe they will need more sacks. That is, if no one else comes along looking for fallen nuts.

There are nuts everywhere, scattered under the palm trees that stand on the edge of the lakebed. They pick each one of these carefully and fill their sacks. But their sacks are getting heavy and they will not be able to walk very far. They can go along the rim of the lakebed to the land that lies beyond it and return through the fields, casting about for more nuts on their way. Shortie is thrilled at the day's haul.

They have never had it so good. Clearly no one else is up. Sometimes Stumpleg and his Gounder are out, looking for nuts together early in the morning. They search everywhere, thoroughly, tirelessly, and when they are done, there is nothing left for others to pick. The only others who come looking for fallen nuts are Muthu Gounder's girls. Saucy and bold, they romp about the field unafraid and

usually return home with huge sacks bursting with nuts.

Selvan is already tired.

"Enough, Shortie. Let's stop. We have plenty here."

"So soon, Master? We must pick at least three more sacks..."

"Can't. My shoulder's paining. Can't carry this stuff all over the place."

Shortie cannot carry two sacks. To do that he will have to carry one on his shoulders and lift the second sack to his head, as he has seen older men do. But the sack is bound to sit oddly on his head, and will surely be knobbly and unsteady, since the round palm nuts roll and move about. Shortie decides they must find a safe place to store their treasure and then go on. Unless of course he leaves the lot with Selvan at the pen and goes on his own. But Selvan may not want that.

"Master, why don't we hide the nuts somewhere?"

"Where? If someone finds them, they'll all be gone."

"I know a hiding place. No one will ever find it."

Shortie leads Selvan to a corner along the edge of the lakebed. A large and scaly palm stump, surrounded by masses of dried palm sheaths stands in a corner. They drag their sacks to it and pour the nuts into its hollow. Shortie covers the hollow with leaves and fronds, arranging them so that they look like they have fallen off on their own. Satisfied, he and Selvan walk along the long line of palm along the lakebed, empty sacks hanging limply on their shoulders.

Every year Shortie saves up ripened palm nuts for replanting. He is alert to the sound of nuts falling even during the day, when he is with his goats. He hoards enough to fill at least three holes dug specially for this purpose. Along the lakebed are sand banks, caused by rivulets of water that

course through in the rainy months. These are good places to dig and replant the seeds from the nuts. Once stuck into the soil, they grow long, thick roots that go deep into the earth. The roots fetch a good price and are much sought after.

For some years now, Shortie has made sure that he has his own patch of earth on the lakebed for replanting. To replant, he breaks open several nuts and extracts the seeds from them. Then he piles them into a long yellow heap next to him. When he thinks he has enough, he takes the shining heap to the sandy hollow he has prepared.

In October, a Muslim trader comes by for the roots. He sometimes comes during the time of the Munisami temple festival. He does not mind if the time to pick palm root is not quite right. He stays for a couple of weeks, and waits for the picking to happen. He eats wherever he finds food, and hangs around the shanar caste quarters, arranging with a shanar family to cook him food. Of course, he pays them for what he eats. Kandamoopan sometimes accompanies him as he roams around, looking for roots. All those who grow roots hand over their produce to him. He is good to them and their gods and once even bought a copper bell for the Munisami temple.

Shortie usually offers him his wares on his very first visit to the fields. He has more for him when he comes a second time. Those are lovely months, when the Muslim trader visits. The fields are green with dense crop. It rains, heavy splattering rain for hours on end. But the trader never fails to turn up. He carries a loaded purse with him and everyone who sells roots to him is paid a fair amount. After the toddy-tapping moopans, it is Shortie who is the trader's biggest supplier of palm roots. He loves the lad and his face breaks into a grin every time he sees him.

"What little Master, think you can manage around ten

thousand roots this year..."

Shortie is always startled when the trader calls him Master. But he says nothing, though he is embarrassed at being addressed that way.

"Not that much. Maybe around three thousand..."

The first time that he brought him roots, the good Muslim paid him two paise per root. He had three thousand roots ready for him then. The following year, he was given three paise. Sometimes he made as much as eighty to ninety rupees on the roots.

Shortie reserves a few seeds for rocky soil. He casts these about carelessly, covering them with a handful of sand. The seeds sprout but the roots do not go deep, since the earth is hard and stony. The sprouts harden into huge, ugly knobs that protrude from the seeds. At this stage they can be scooped from the earth and split open for the thick flesh that crowds their sides. Shortie takes these home to his Gounder Mistress, who loves to cut open a knobbly seed and chew on its sweet core.

The Gounder knows that Shortie gathers palm nuts and that he hoards some for replanting. He sometimes sees his towers of yellow seeds but does not say anything. He smiles to himself, though.

Initially it was the Gounder who taught Shortie how to replant seeds. He had taken him to the lakebed and shown him the way to do it. That year, Shortie earned fifty rupees on the roots. He rolled the money in his towel and brought it to the Gounder in the night, at the cow pen.

"What's this?"

"Root money."

Shortie did not think the money was his. Or could be his. He felt it was natural he should hand the Gounder the money he had earned on his harvest. He waited. Was the Master

angry? He could not see his face clearly in the dark.

"How much?"

The Master does not trust me, thought Shortie. He thinks I have kept back something from what the Muslim gave me.

"Fifty rupees."

His voice dropped.

"Keep it for new clothes. You said you wanted new shorts and a shirt."

"Don't want it, Master."

"Go on, keep it."

Shortie knew then that there was no point opposing him. Fifty rupees, and all his own. He could not believe it was his for spending. Shortie did not know how much he was paid. Sometimes his mother would tell him. Or he heard it from his Gounder Mistress.

"You've already been paid for. Your father comes in the middle of the year and demands we give him stuff. And then what happens? Your loll around the place doing nothing... tell your father to return those rupees! Now! Every one of them."

He did not want to hand his father the money. No use, for he would spend it all. His mother—that was different. Maybe he should go home to his mother this time, ask her to buy him clothes. But would the Mistress let him go? What if she decided he had not done this or that and kept back some of the money?

"Master, you keep it. You buy me clothes next time you go to the market."

The Gounder appeared pleased with his request. The following Tuesday, which was the traditional market day, he returned with a shirt printed over with bright flowers and a pair of shorts. He told Shortie they had cost him forty

rupees and that he would keep the remaining ten rupees. Shortie could of course ask for it anytime he wanted.

Shortie was thrilled with his new clothes and wore them two days. But after that, he took them off, washed them, folded them carefully and put them away in an old box that lay in the cow pen. He asked for his ten rupees when he went home for the mother goddess temple festival in a nearby village.

From that year he decided he would gather as many palm nuts as he could. Usually the Gounder bought him clothes twice a year, once during the harvest festival, in mid-January and another during the big temple festival in May. Now he would get a third set of clothes.

When he handed the money to the Gounder the second year around, the man frowned.

"What now? Keep it yourself, can't you?"

Since then the Gounder has ceased to ask him how much money he earned. Shortie does not tell him either, but is ready to if asked. He is glad the Gounder does not scold him, though his Mistress would, if she got to know of it.

This was the fourth year of root harvesting.

He loves this time of the year, the time of nuts falling. He feels it in his bones, this joy of nut-picking and knows himself happier for it.

His shoulder hurts. Selvan's sack is only half-full, but he cannot carry any more. The air is filled with the chorus of birds from the tops of the trees. A wagtail calls out insistently from a faraway tree in the lakebed. They walk, looking up at the palms, laden with nuts. Some of these are old trees, they have borne fruit before. Others are young and new. They have started only that year.

Shortie sees a palm whose leaves stick out like a fan. He wants to go up to it, but Selvan is unwilling. He is impatient

and wants to give up. They walk on when, suddenly, Selvan stops in his tracks. Near a big palm thorn along the edge of the lake bed is a nut. He drops his sack and runs up to it. Shortie follows him. Selvan tries to pick up the nut, but finds he cannot. It slithers and slips down. His fingers feel sticky.

"Chi!"

It is not a nut but a ball of cowdung! Perhaps three or four days old, dry on the outside and slimy on the inside. Shortie looks closely. The dung is full of dung beetles and worms. He holds his hand to his mouth but the smile spills out, nevertheless. Poor Selvan! He wanted to pick his own nut and he had to go and choose a piece of dung. Selvan looks away and marches to a nearby tree to wipe his hands on its trunk. He cannot get all of the sticky dung off. Shortie puts his sack down and laughs.

"Shut up, Shortie! What's so funny?"

Selvan slaps him hard with his dung-smeared hand. Then he rubs his fingers on the tail of Shortie's loincloth until all the dung from his fingers is on the cloth. Shortie stands still. But what does Shortie care? He has a tale now for other times. Times when he can taunt Selvan:

"Yes, yes, Master. We know how good you are. Didn't you bring back a huge shining palm fruit the other day... what a fruit that was. Something none of us has ever seen before!"

Shortie decides that they must move on. No point in laughing further. Selvan cannot take a joke and god knows what he will do if he gets annoyed.

"Come, Master, let's go. There's that thorny tree still."

"You go yourself."

"Come, come. I won't tell anyone of the nut you picked..."

Smiling to himself, Shortie leads the way. Selvan walks behind sullenly. Selvan is not much help. He picks maybe

ten, fifteen nuts. Not much more than what Shortie could have done on his own. But then Shortie is glad for the company though on days like this he wonders if it is worth his while to take Selvan along. If he wasn't there, he would be faster, he could run here and there and gather more.

They walk towards the thorny palm tree. It stands tall and proud, its leaves spread out wide, like an eagle's wing. Around its roots and reaching almost halfway up its trunk are sharp thorny bushes. The palm sways in the wind, its leaves rub against its scarred trunk and set up a scraggy rustle. The nuts are high up on the tree and hard to see in the half-light of morning. When it is bright daylight, you can see them shining through their cover of leaves and fronds.

Shortie asks Selvan to keep away from the tree. He walks to it and sits down a little away from it. He looks intently at its roots. Dark all around. He goes closer and looks into the bushes. There is a pinpoint of light in there and he thinks he sees a few nuts. One is on a large piece of thorn.

Not many dare to get into the bush. Shortie knows his way though—last year he had cut a path through the thorns, a narrow path into which he could crawl. Like a bandicoot, he crouches and finds his way through to where a nut lies. He taps at it with his neem stick and tries to move it towards him. It rolls about but finally he has it at arm's length. He picks it up and feels its warm, thick rind. A solid nut but it looks slightly ripped apart. Maybe a squirrel got to it first. Now for the second nut.

He has to move in a bit more to get to it. It is further away and his stick can barely reach it. After much effort he gets it in the line of his stick. Slowly, carefully, he pulls the nut towards him. Just then he feels a thorn prick his head. He removes the towel from his head, takes out the thorn, making sure the towel does not tear. He drops the nuts into the towel

and clutching his booty to his chest, crawls out. Just as he places his hands on the ground to raise himself up, a thorn jabs him on his right foot.

Shortie usually takes good care of his feet. He walks easily, but carefully, and is light on his toes. He knows he will never get to wear slippers and is doubly cautious. He sits down, feeling pain shoot up his ankle and leg. He had been careless, thrilled with the nuts and unwatchful of the thorns. He lifts his leg to his lap and with practised skill, works at prising the thorn away from the inside of his foot. He takes care not to pull too strongly for he does not want the thorn to break in his flesh. It is out finally, a sharp pointed thorn. His foot bleeds for a while and then stops. He gets up and hobbles, fruit in hand, to where Selvan sits.

"Dai, What happened?"

There is genuine fear and concern in Selvan's tone.

"Nothing much. Got pricked by a thorn."

He must stop by an erukkan plant and squeeze some of its juice on to his wound. He can warm his foot later in the day on the Big Rock. He has not managed to get the nut on the thorn and he must. A lovely big one.

"There's one more in there, Master. I'll get it and then we can go."

Selvan looks up from his task of stuffing his sack with the two new nuts.

"Dai! Don't go barefoot. Here, wear my slippers."

"Never mind, Master."

"Here. Come."

Selvan has them off his feet. Shortie is not sure if he should do this. Nice rubber slippers.

"Put them on."

Shortie walks back to the thorny bush. He walks tall, yet

his feet feel heavy, as if weighed down by something that he cannot see. He walks slowly, each step an effort. But he is happy, and the sound of his feet thumping along seems like music to his ears. He must somehow get at that fruit. Somehow.

The slippers will protect him, of that he is sure.

Thirteen

Selvan has come prepared. He has a fresh shirt with him, all folded and a two rupee note. He has gone to great trouble to save up that money. It was difficult to steal away with the shirt and he has had to plan for it. He has pulled it out of the cupboard when his mother was not looking, and hidden it under a stone which lies on the way to the pen.

Later in the night when he and Shortie walk to the fields with food for the dog, Selvan stops by the stone, bends down and pulls something out. Shortie is puzzled.

"What's this Master?"

"This? An old snakeskin. I've kept it hidden here."

"Snakeskin?"

Shortie is startled and wonders what Selvan has been up to.

"Dai, Shortie! Know what I'm going to do? Rub this skin on the palm of my right hand and slap you hard with it."

Shortie tries to drag him away from the stone. He does not want to be hit with a palm roughened by snakeskin. Why, you can die that way, within a few hours of the snakeskin-roughened hand hitting you in the face.

"Forget the snakeskin. You want to feel my bare palm?!"

Selvan pulls away from him, digs underneath the stone and pulls something out.

"Rascal! You dare talk back like this to me?"

Shortie does not reply but starts walking ahead fast, with Selvan running after him. Really, thinks Selvan, this Shortie is too much. Talks back to him, Selvan, stares him in the eye and who knows, he might even address him in the familiar first person one of these days. What if he calls him "Dai,

Selva!"? Selvan's face tightens at the thought.

The air is still and broken only by the sound of Poochi's watery food sloshing around in the pail. Selvan wonders if he should speak out after all. What if Shortie refuses to help him carry out his plan for the night?

"Shortie, what's wrong? Why the hell are you so quiet?"

"Me? I'll talk alright. Let's see you beat me with that snakeskin and I'll talk."

"So I said I'd beat you. And you spoke back. We're quits now. Leave it..."

"I will. Now tell me what you have in your hand."

Selvan lean over and whispers:

"We're going to the cinema tonight."

Shortie gulps. He sees his Gounder's furrowed face and his Mistress's flaying hands before him.

"No."

He does not want to leave the pen unguarded. He has never done it before. He may wander around the fields, play at this and that, but has always made sure that he is within sight of the pen. What if it rains as it did the other night? If he had not been there, the goats would have scattered in fear... the fence fallen on them... in that stormy darkness anything could have happened.

"Not me, Master. You go if you wish."

Shortie's firm tone disappoints Selvan. He had not thought Shortie would refuse him outright. Shortie meanwhile makes a mental calculation as to how long it will take for them to go to the cinema and back. I suppose we can cut through the fields past the porter's stone and then we are on the road to the town. And we may have to leave the minute we reach the pen. Only then can we make it before the film starts. God knows what film they have on. And when we return it is sure to be past midnight. That

means the pen will remain unguarded for several hours. Not a soul around for miles. Any thief can walk in and drive all the twenty goats away. And then, I'll have to pay the Gounder the cost of all those goats, perhaps work all my life. No, he cannot, must not agree to this plan. Not budge, whatever Selvan says. What does he care? If something happens to the goats, he doesn't have to pay for them, he won't be made to work off the debt.

"Shortie, I've come prepared, money and all."

Selvan sounds forlorn.

"Call me for any game within the fields, I'll come. But not outside it."

"Dai, Shortie, its not any old film, but Nadodi Mannan. An MGR film. MGR, Shortie, your favourite hero."

Shortie knows about that film. He has been wanting to see it and tried once before. But he was not successful. Stumpleg has seen the film and has boasted to him about it. Especially about that wonderful song, 'Don't sleep, little brother, don't sleep'. At that time Shortie had felt like running home on some excuse or the other and bullying his mother for some money to go to the cinema. But he did not, because he did not know how to lie to the Gounder. He practised several times, tried to imagine himself telling the Gounder this and that, but gave up. He knew he could not do it, could not look his Master in the eye and lie. One look from underneath those eyebrows and all those carefully thought-out lies would flee his tongue.

"Where is it running Master, this film?"

"Krishna Talkies. Not too far. We can be back soon..."

"And the pen? I can't leave it like this..."

"The goats won't be alone. There's Poochi on guard..."

"Anything can happen, Master."

To the south of the lakebed, past a stretch of plots, is Sahibu Kaattu Gounder's pen. The closest to their own. To the east but faraway are a few houses. But no one ventures into these fields from there. If for some reason Poochi barks continuously of a night, they might come by in the morning to find out if anything was wrong. Kandamoopan's hut is to the west of the pen. Not too far but most nights he is dead drunk and lost to the world. Even if his own hut were to burn, he would probably sit up and belch and spit in response. His Gounder's home and cow pen stand north from where the pen is. But they are really far and no sound from the fields ever reaches there. Even if the lakebed was to flood during the night and overflow into the fields, his Gounder wouldn't know about it until morning.

"Shortie, who's to know we're not here? We can do something to make them think there're people here."

"No, I wasn't thinking of that..."

"Come on, Shortie. Don't fuss so much. We'll go and come back soon. No one will know. Don't you want to see the famous prison scene—your hero talking to his love through the jail bars. Everyone in school has seen it. I'm the only..."

"Master, why don't you go ask your father for permission to go on your own? Why drag me into it? I'm scared, whatever you say."

"Scared? Of what? I'm here with you. I'll make sure nothing happens."

"Let's think about this. Think carefully. Maybe go some other day. Like tomorrow."

"Think? What's there to think about? The film's been running for more than a week. Who knows when they'll take it off? If you feel like doing this, you should just do it. Look, I'm asking you, pleading—and you're not even willing to..."

"You can talk, but if something goes wrong, I'll have to face your father."

"What could go wrong? Whatever happens, I won't let you down. Come, on, let's get on with it."

"That's what you say, but tomorrow if something happens to the goats, you'll drop me like you drop the stone you wipe your arse with..."

Shortie is now close to tears. Selvan feels that he has won half the battle. But he wants to make sure.

"Shortie, really... I mean it. I'll be there for you... no need to be so afraid."

Shortie shakes his head doubtfully.

Selvan immediately sets about finishing all the tasks at the pen. He pours Poochi's food into the bowl and ties up the dog's chain securely. He double-knots the rope that holds the bamboo poles and pulls it tight. Shortie goes around the pen and tests the ropes that hold the fence to make sure they are firm and taut. He looks for two large fronds. He finds a pair and lays them on the cot, and covers them with Selvan's sheet. He does this so well that it does look as if a person is asleep on the bed—Selvan on his stomach, his feet stretched out. But to make the sack seem as if Shortie was on it? He ponders and finally decides to stuff the sack with palm fronds. He stands back to look at himself asleep. It looks like a huge sack, not a person sleeping. But there is nothing more he can do.

Selvan gets ready, puts on his shirt. Shortie has neither shorts nor shirt. He is always in his loincloth. Good to roam the fields, but to go to town? To Tiruchengode? Also, it is a windy night. And chilly at that. He cannot walk with a sheet wound around him. People will stare and he will have to answer to all sorts of questions. If Selvan had told me earlier, I'd have brought my shirt from the cow pen, he thinks. That lovely green shirt I bought in May, when the gods were taken

in procession around the village. Shortie sighs. He will have to make do with what he has. He decides to wear his towel like a dhoti around his waist. Who is going to look at me anyway? After all it is a night show and we will buy floor tickets and sit on the sand. Then I won't even need this dhoti, I can sit down in my loincloth.

Shortie and Selvan walk away from the pen. Shortie's head is all abuzz. He turns back and looks at the fence and the hut from time to time. He is not sure if he is going to enjoy watching his hero.

In time, the pen, the fence and hut inside fade into the dark of the night.

Shortie's Gounder's father, the Old Gounder, who has taken to his bed lately, loved going to the cinema. When he was up and about, he would watch at least a film a month. And only at night. He loved the 'second show' as it was called. He never went alone: Shortie, Stumpleg, Tallfellow, Selvan— he asked one or the other of these boys to go with him. His favourites were Tallfellow and Shortie. Selvan would go of a night, but not often. His mother did not want him to go and was once heard muttering loudly, within the Old Gounder's earshot.

"Old wretch! Not content with wanting to see films at his age, wants to spoil my son!"

The Old Gounder paid for Shortie and Tallfellow's tickets, but if either of them offered to pay for themselves, he did not say no. The two loved going with him. The old man always chose the night of the full moon to go to the cinema. He would get ready at an early hour, even as twilight faded into dusk, eat his frugal night meal and wait for the boys. He wore a towel wrapped round his head like a turban, a blanket across his shoulders and carried a tall walking stick. The motley group would walk the four miles to Tiruchengode, and arrive in time for the ticket counters to

open. The Old Gounder kept a steady pace on those nights. He walked slowly, unhurriedly. If Shortie or Tallfellow tried to race ahead, he would shout at them.

"Dai! What the hell are you hurrying for? No one's going to lop your head off if you walk slowly!"

The road the trio walked was a broad white strip in the moonlight. Tall tamarind trees on both sides of the road cast their long, entwined shadows across the moonstruck expanse in the middle. It was a lovely road, the kind that makes you want to walk on and on, until the very end. Shortie sometimes wondered if the road did indeed have an end. He would walk in the middle of the road, bathed in the light of the full moon, making wild, happy sounds. From time to time, Tallfellow's hoarse voice would shatter the quiet of the night and stir the small birds in their tamarind tree nests awake.

"Softly. Softly." The old man's voice would drop. "Don't wake up those poor birds. Poor mites. All day they've been flying looking for food. Why do you want to disturb them?"

The Old Gounder never tired of telling the story of how he started going to the cinema. He would repeat the tale to whoever asked him to:

In those days, if a man wished to buy fodder for his cattle, he and his cohorts yoked a pair of bullocks to a cart and set off to towns like Erode and Pallipalayam. Massive mounds of hay were available in plenty and cheaply in these towns. The party from the village stayed in town for a day or two. It took that long to haggle and make their purchases. At such times, they invariably went to the cinema and for the second show. This was how the Old Gounder found himself becoming a cinema addict.

On his very first visit to the cinema theatre, he expected actors and actresses to be there in person on stage, with their makeup in place, their songs and dances all planned. Then when he saw them appear like shadows on screen,

ghostly shapes that loomed large and disappeared without a warning, he begun to feel afraid. He laughed each time he retold that part of the story. It took him a while to understand a film plot, to follow a scene. Later, of course, it was all easy —he went to all sorts of films. Each one of them, their plots, the characters, remained with him and he would readily tell a tale if anyone asked him to.

When it was time for the ripened tamarind to be picked off the trees, the old man would walk the road to the cinema at least three times or even more in a month. Then the road was littered with tamarind pods. The trees were leased out to people who picked and sold the tamarind, but the pickers worked only in the day. During the night the trees belonged to the old man and the boys. The Old Gounder knew which tree yielded the tastiest pulp, which tree, the sweetest. He would instruct the boys to pick pods that had fallen off these particular trees. And they would go down on all fours, not minding the wind in their faces and pick furiously. The old man would stand in the middle of the road, leaning on his staff, his lean frame shivering in the night wind. To an unsuspecting traveller he probably seemed like a ghost, a spirit that had been startled out of its sleep, and lost its way.

For those occasions the Old Gounder had a large plastic bag into which the boys stuffed fistfuls of ripe tamarind. When the bag was full, it was left hidden along the bank of a small lake they passed on their way to town. The old man had found this place and was pleased with himself for doing so.

"No one ever comes here. They wouldn't dare. And even if they do, they would get scared. But not me, I know how to take care of ghosts and spirits!"

On their way back from the cinema, the Old Gounder would slide down the slope and retrieve the loot. For the boys, all this was fun—not just watching the movie or the stolen tamarind. The walking in the moonlight, the joking,

the sense of being out in the middle of the night without fear, the road that wound its way like a gleaming black snake. Shortie often wanted to roll on it, it appeared so sinuous in the light of the moon.

The boys sometimes ran ahead and waited for the Old Gounder to catch up with them. He would hobble along slowly and come upon them sitting by the roadside. Or even lying down and talking. Some nights, hearing the sound of his stick approaching them, the two would hide themselves behind a tree. When the Gounder appeared on the road, they would jump out, screaming. It was easy to startle the old man, but he made light of it.

"You human spirits! Think I'm afraid of you?"

If Selvan formed one of the party, things soured for all of them. He would get annoyed for no reason, sulk, sit by the wayside. He would have to be cajoled and comforted and brought around. Even the Old Gounder found his grandson tiring.

"What an irritating pup you're! Who asked you to come?"

Once he took them to a film titled Kannavane Kann Kanda Deivam. This was during the tamarind-picking season. But on the day they set out for this movie, there was not a bit of wind. Even on their way back, they found the air tight and dense. The trees stood still, as if they had been beaten into repose. There was not a single tamarind pod to be had. Nothing at all on the road. Nothing they could pick up and suck at. The Old Gounder was extremely disappointed.

"Dai! What kind of a night is this? What the..."

He went on and on, as if he were keening away a dead soul. Tallfellow felt he had just about had it. He asked the Gounder if he should not climb a tree and shake down a few ripe pods. The old man was thrilled. He agreed right away.

"Go on! Climb!"

They found a tree past the porter's stone, in the middle of a thick line of foliage. A tall, full-leaved tree, whose tamarind pods glowed brown and long in the moonlight. Tallfellow hoisted himself onto a branch and shook the one above him. The tree scattered into sound at once: leaves rustled, birds screeched in fright and unexpectedly broke into song. They had woken up to find that it was still night. They could not hope to fly into the dark. At least nowhere far. So they decided to sing. They hopped up and down branches, called out to each other, flew round and round the treetop not knowing what to do. Though there was no wind to carry their calls into the faraway fields, they were loud enough to be heard by anyone walking the road. Their loud, plaintive tones resounded off the quiet of the night.

The Old Gounder found a tall stone under a tree and sat down. He was pleased. A host of pods had fallen off the tree after Tallfellow's vigorous shaking. Nice dry pods. A strong wind would have brought more down. Almost all of it.

Suddenly they heard a voice bellowing into the night. And the sound of running feet. Shortie looked around him. He saw a man running towards the tree. Probably a guard appointed by the person who had taken a lease on the tamarind tree. He must have heard the bird-cries and known someone was on the tree. Not all trees had sentinels. Most were left unguarded, but sometimes if word got around that they were being regularly looted, a guard was appointed.

Shortie ran as fast as he could. Forget those tamarinds, he told himself. Just get away. After he had run along for a while, he stopped. He realised that he was alone. He felt a pang of regret. Then shame, utter shame at having left Tallfellow and the Old Gounder behind. Should he turn back? Or wait for them? He couldn't decide. He was also afraid to be alone. Even if a small stone were to hit him, he was sure to piss in fright, all the way down his legs. Even as he stood

wondering, he saw a figure walking towards him. Tallfellow. Strolling along and neither breathless nor anxious. He did not seem to be in a hurry. He looked pleased.

"Saw a ghost or something Shortie? You ran like a madman!"

When he last saw him, Tallfellow had been on the tree. Shortie thought he would be caught, coming down.

"I was on the lower branch. You saw me. So I cackled and laughed, and made all sorts of strange sounds, and the man thought I was a spirit! He just froze right there. And before he could move again, I jumped the other way and ran!"

Shortie wondered about the Old Gounder. Poor old man! He couldn't walk fast even if he tried. They must have caught him. Who knows, they might even tie his hands and legs and make him sit under the tree until daybreak! A great shame, and worse, a dishonour to the Old Gounder and his family. They would also scold him for being upto such mischief in his old age.

"They probably got him, the old one, I mean," said Tallfellow, reading Shortie's thoughts. "At least I hope they've got him. And I hope they pluck that bloody stick off his hands!— how he goes tut-tut-tut with it—and beat him nicely. We missed it, Shortie, missed seeing him beaten up."

Shortie did not think so. He felt bad—they ought not to have left a defenseless old man, a hobbling old man to his fate.

"Poor thing. I want to go and see. Come!"

On their way back to the tree, Tallfellow wondered loudly at the curses that would have been showered on the old man. The man who had leased tamarind trees on the road for that year was a merchant from Tiruchengode. Not someone from the Old Gounder's village. So there was no way that the guard, also probably from Tiruchengode, could have known the old man. At least, if he had been someone

the Old Gounder knew, he would have been let off. Or at least the old man would have found a way to extricate himself from the mess.

"Old Motherfucker! I hope they kicked his arse! Kicked him, and gave him a good yelling. A thief and at his age."

Tallfellow was still relishing his wishful tale when they reached the porter's stone. They decided not to rush forward to the tree. Perhaps they should wait by the stone to see if anyone was around. As they sat and waited, the night lengthened sending Shortie off to sleep. His eyes began to close involuntarily, his head lolled to one side.

"Dai! Up! Look! There comes the old fellow!"

Shortie jerked awake and saw the Gounder walking towards them. The old man walked cautiously, looking this way and that. Slowly, slower than his usual pace. He walked, not daring to tap his stick on the rode. Almost like a cat. The two ran towards him. And then stopped. Was this indeed the Old Gounder?

"What a thing! I could have easily been caught. But the fellow who came running didn't see me sitting there. I slowly stole away and hide behind that tree. Pressed myself into it. And then you laughed Tally! What a laugh! Even I was scared and that fellow was shitting. After you went he looked all around him and waited there for a while. Hoping that someone would come, I guess. Then he went away—this way to the east. I stood behind the tree for some time. Wanted to make sure he didn't return. If that sister-fucker had dared to, I would have covered my head with hay and twigs and frightened him. He'd have taken me for a spirit and sprinted! What a thing! But enough of this. Let's go. No more tamarind picking!"

When the trio reached home, the cock had crowed.

The movie is over. As Shortie and Selvan step into the fields, ducking a fence that separated one plot of land from

another, Shortie hears something slither on the ground. He stops, pulls Selvan back and motions to him to stand still. A long rope of a thing slides under the fence. Its undersides glow in the moonlight. Selvan screams:

"Snake! Snake!"

"Ssh... ssh... not that, don't call it by name..."

Shortie stops Selvan's mouth with his hand. His heart beats faster than usual. Not a good sign, the snake. Does it mean then that his head is in danger? His stomach feels hollow and warm, as if a fire were burning steadily inside it. They wait until the snake is out of their sight and then start walking.

It is nice to be back in the fields, thinks Shortie. There are many wonderful things to be seen in the world, but there is a certain comfort in coming home, an ineffable joy in returning to what holds you, night and day. Selvan is still in a state of shock.

"Know what I like about her, that heroine? Her soft cheeks. And when she puts her head to one side and sings, 'do you consent, then?', God, I love it. What a woman."

"You know she sings that song herself?"

"That other one, what's her name how, she's tiny, almost a girl..."

"Look at you Shortie! Talking only of the women in the movie! Not a word about the men. Didn't you like them?"

"I did. I did. But women I like extra. More."

"Why?"

"Why not? Must be the same for you..."

"Not at all."

"Then who do you like?"

"All. I like them all the same."

Shortie is not convinced. Should I say something, ask

him why he hides his feelings? But what if the fellow gets annoyed? You can never tell with Selvan. He walks on, a faint smile playing about his lips.

"Actually, Master, I don't know why I like women."

"Ask Belly. Ask her."

Startled by the tight violence in him, Shortie forgets himself.

"Why, Master, want me to ask her on your behalf as well?"

"Bastard! What guts!"

Selvan raises his hand, Shortie steps out of his way and starts running. Should he convert this into a catching game? He knows Selvan will not rest until he has hit him at least once. Shortie lets himself get caught. Selvan holds him by his shoulder and pounds his back so hard that his own hand hurts.

"Come on, Master. Enough. Leave me now!"

Selvan lets go, mollified by his pleading tone. They walk down to the dry waterway. Soon the pen looms up, a hazy line of hut and fence. Shortie feels relieved.

A cloud passes over the moon, and darkness descends on the field. The cloud takes its time to sail on, while an impatient Shortie waits, gritting his teeth. It is like waiting to climb over a steep hill. Then, as the cloud slides over and beyond the moon, the field emerges into light. Shortie breathes easy, glad to have the pen in his sight once again. He starts running towards it. As if he was running towards a loved one from whom he has been parted for long. Selvan pants after him.

"Dai! Wait! Wait!"

Poochi jumps out of its cozy hole in the ground and runs to greet them, its tail wagging furiously. Shortie is happy to see the creature. All must be well, he thinks, the dog has kept guard all this time.

Then he sees it.

The cot! The sheet has been pulled off, and the two fronds lie naked. Shortie is not immediately worried. Maybe it is the wind that did this. He looks around. The ropes that hold the fence appear firm and tight. At least they have done their duty. He goes up to the bamboo poles and examines the knot that holds it in place.

Not their type of knot, but a different one.

Someone has lifted the bamboo poles and re-tied the rope that held them together.

Shortie's heart kicks wildly against his ribs. A great moan rises in his stomach. Selvan hurries to his side. The goats raise their heads, some stand up, surprised to see such activity at this hour.

"Dai! What?"

"Over. Gone! All over!"

Shortie talks as if he is possessed, as if someone has smashed his face and his tongue has lost all other words but these. His fingers shake as they untie the knot that holds the bamboo poles together. Selvan puts his hand to the knot and loosens it. They rush into the pen, scaring the goats which crowd together in a corner, surprised and hurt at this rude intrusion. The goats look as if something has gone wrong. Shortie calls:

"Ho! Ho!"

The goats freeze to their places, reassured by his familiar tone. Shortie starts to count the goats. Seventeen. There should be eighteen. He counts again. And again. Seventeen still. He asks Selvan to count. It is still seventeen. Who is missing? Veeran... no, he is there. Nedumbi, Vattalu, the he-goats, the kids... he sees them all.

All but one. Nedumbi's little one. The small he-goat.

Where is the kid? A round, cuddly goat, it had been

weaned over a month ago. A trader from Aandipalayam wanted to buy it off his Gounder Master. He came a week ago and offered ninety rupees for it. The Gounder wanted a hundred and twenty rupees. The trader might have settled for a hundred rupees, or even a hundred and ten.

"Aiyo! Aiyo!"

Shortie screams. His Gounder. Those eyes, black, burning eyes.

"Aiyo!"

Shortie beats his stomach and continues to scream. He throws himself down, kicks his feet in the air. Crawls to one of the stilts that hold up the hut, hugs it for comfort and cries. He beats his head against the stilts and moans loudly. His pained shout is like that of a he-goat when he is being neutered.

"Aiyo! What'll I do? What am I going to do?"

Selvan tries to console him. He holds him by the shoulder and shakes him.

"Dai! Stop it! Stop this screaming!"

Shortie refuses to be consoled. He cannot but cry. He has to. Nothing for him but to weep. His voice dissolves into mere sound. Then suddenly,

"Master. It's all your fault!"

Shortie grabs Selvan and pushes him down. Selvan falls onto the shit-ridden ground. Shortie gets up, lifts the bamboo poles and rushes out. His eyes alight on Poochi who is outside, staring into the pen. He kicks the dog, first in the stomach and then on its legs. It yelps and falls down. He kicks it again. It looks sorrowfully at him, unwilling to bite back. He raises his foot to it and it retreats, setting up a low, humming cry.

Selvan comes out. Holding Shortie by his hair, he slaps him on his cheek.

"Have you gone mad?"

Shortie stands still for a moment. His tears continue to flow. But his voice is a whimper now. He slides down and sits leaning against the fence. The whipcord, his father with folded hands, his mother who only knows how to wail and moan... the kid, a frisky, mischievous kid. Sand-coloured, except for a patch of white on its face. Gone, gone. His mind is a wave of images that fade into each other. His body heaves, racked by uncontrollable sobs.

Selvan is more poised. Almost composed.

"Don't cry." He cajoles first, then orders: "Stop it now!"

Shortie blinks, wipes his eyes. His tears have dried up, but his body shakes and shivers.

"Alright, so it's gone. What do we do? Will the kid bounce back, simply because you're crying for it?"

Selvan's sharp tone irritates Shortie.

"You! You're responsible. I told you I wouldn't come. You made me..."

"Alright. I did. Now, what are we going to do about it?"

"Fuck all you can do about it."

Shortie's words are spat out. They splash like venom in Selvan's face. Selvan feels something flat and heavy on his nose and his face burns red with shame. But he keeps his calm.

"Don't go on like a madman! Listen, you don't have to tell my father anything. Just keep quiet about the kid. He never comes here. He won't know."

"That's what you think. Your father has just to cast an eye on this herd and he'll know who's there and who's not there. And this kid has been spoken for. At least two traders have come asking for it. Why even yesterday morning, he brought someone over..."

"Must be someone from here who stole it. I don't think it is a thief from outside. No one will come this far to steal a bloody kid!"

"Did you tell anyone that we might go the cinema?"

"Of course not. No one knows."

"But someone knew and came when we were not there."

"Rubbish. Nothing like that. Some chap walking by must have seen the place and come here. Seeing no one around, he walked away with what he could carry!"

"God! He's probably slaughtered the thing already and eaten it!"

"Or he might take it alive to the market tomorrow."

"God alone knows who made a fucking feast out of that poor kid!"

"Listen, Shortie! Don't tell my father. We'll see what happens. We'll pull through..."

What does Selvan know about the Gounder's intuition? His searching eyes, his discerning nose. This bloody Selvan shits in his pants if his father so much as looks him in the eye. At least he can stand in front of the Gounder Master and talk. Not Selvan. One angry word from his father and Selvan hides in the folds of his mother's sari. And if the Gounder is not told now and finds out later, I'll have it, thinks Shortie. He'll have my hide, skin my back and pickle it.

"We'll go right away and tell the Master. Accept whatever punishment he gives. There's no other way out of this. I'll take it, if he beats me. Hold my body tight..."

"Idiot! It's not just you. What about me? He'll beat me too..."

"What's to be done, Master? I have to worry about other things too. There's the price the kid was spoken for. I'll have

to work it off! My father can't pay for it. And he'll beat me too."

"If my father asks you to pay him for the kid, I'll help you. Get money out of my mother and pass it on to you."

"That's what you say now. But when it comes to it you'll leave me to face it on my own!"

"Why don't we wait for two days and then tell him? Let's tell him a fox came and carried the kid off!"

"Forget it, Master. What fox? There's no fox in these parts and your father knows that. You can't cheat him. There's nothing to do but get beaten!"

"You dog! You want me to get whipped, do you?"

"Whipping's the least of it. We have to tell your father..."

"No."

"Have to."

Selvan lapses into a dark silence. Shortie's mind plays with all sorts of plans. He must talk nicely to the Gounder, make sure he is not whipped too badly. Maybe he can pay for the kid, with the money from the palm nuts. His father need never know about this.

Shortie's mind conjures up the Gounder's face in all its various moods. And his own face too, as he stands cowering? What words should he speak? What gestures ought he to adopt?

He tries making up sentences, but with each word, the Gounder grows in size until he steps out of Shortie's body and stands before him.

A huge man-mountain.

Dry Earth

Fourteen

The fields are thick with seed. The kambu crop stands densely green, as tall as a person's hand. Avarai and tattai bean creepers are everywhere, their leaves a pale green flush on the landscape. Straggly peanut stalks stand in untidy clumps in some plots. Woven with the peanut are the thuvarai beans, nudging their necks out of the earth. And next to these, the thick castor plants. It is hard to see where the corn stalks grow—they stand along the far edges of the fields in broad lines.

The red of the earth has gone under, covered with this green that has lain dormant in its womb, soaking in the richness of the soil, biding its time. The Big Rock stands out like a lone sentinel of the fields. There is no place now for Shortie and his friends to romp about. Even the raised ridges that separate one plot from another are overgrown with furry green moss. Sinuous and long, the ridges run through the fields, like the long tails of loincloths.

As the day advances, the plants gather strength and sway easily in the light and wind. There is a dash of green in the dry palms too—they do not look as forlorn as they do in the summer. But there are no goats in the fields now. And no goatherding children. The goats and the children are in the lakebed. There, along with thorny bushes and looming trees, are patches of grassland for the goats to feed. The rain this season has not been the kind that beats steadily down. It has been niggardly, just enough to wet a parched throat. Yet the lakebed is not wholly dry. Near the spot where the bed narrows to a channel that flows into the fields, is a large square sheet of water. And all across the rest of the bed are little hollows, filled to the brim with the long-gone rain.

The lake is home to different kinds of dry grass and the spreading aavaaram bushes which grow everywhere, with their bright yellow flowers. The Big Rock to the far side of the lakebed is lined and furrowed with rain marks. Here, the paalai and oonja trees are in bloom. In the clefts, holes and niches of stone and slab there are patches of green—grass and bush that the goats love to feed on. They scramble nimbly across the line of rocks that leads up to the Big Rock, picking their way quickly, clambering up and jumping around. They are happiest when they are here and can be left to themselves. At this time of the year, the goatherding children find time to sit in the shade of trees, play and talk.

Part of their herd is in the lakebed, busy amongst the tall, stiff grass that grows there. Another herd of goats is up in the rocks, leaping from ledge to ledge. Belly, Shortie and Tallfellow are with the animals. But not Stumpleg. He does not bring his Gounder's goats to graze this time of the year. He is busy with farm work. He takes a pair of oxen to the plough, or clears a patch of land of weeds... or sometimes, he drives his Master's bullock cart to the city. They cart stone and sand, for a fee, to the building sites there.

Stumpleg's Gounder does not like to see him idle even for a moment. He thinks that goatherding is an idler's task. He often says, "You don't have to do anything—no bending, straining or sweating with that work" or, "Dai, you call this work? All you do is swing your stick about and follow a goat's arse!" When he says "swing your stick", he has a knowing leer on his face and wags a finger in front of Stumpleg's face. He hates to have the lame young man out of his sight. At harvest time, Stumpleg and his Master are always out in the fields together.

Stumpleg's Gounder has some of the best land in the region. During the peanut harvest, the dead stalks beaten into hay are piled in a huge heap on his threshing floor. A

haystack as tall as a small hill, enough to feed fifty goats, or even a hundred, and more. The goats do not have such a good time of it though. They are forced to remain indoors, especially at night, and sometimes even during the day. Indoors, they feed off two long troughs, filled with a meal of peanut fodder mixed with water.

In the late afternoon, they are let out to feed on the peanut stalks and they nibble at them with a fierceness that is comic. When the sun is about to set, Stumpleg's Gounder takes the goats to feed on the broad ridges that he has raised to crisscross and surround his land. Long sticks in hand, the Gounder and Stumpleg stand guard on either end of the ridges, to make sure that the goats do not stray away from their boundaries. But the goats are happy not to stray—the grass on the ridges is easy to graze. They feed in a straggly line, looking from afar like a grey, meandering streak of water.

Stonedeaf's goats are also in the fields, but she is not around. A few days ago, of an afternoon, just when sowing had begun, her mother came to fetch her home. Earlier in the morning, Stonedeaf had not felt well. Later they found out why. Stonedeaf was a 'big girl' now.

Since then, Shortie, Belly and Tallfellow have taken over her tasks. They find it hard, especially in the evenings, to gather her flock and drive it home. Some days, her Gounder comes himself and leads his goats away. But on most days, Tallfellow and Shortie have to drive them to their pen, and then return to take their own goats back. It is hard work, and they don't like it, but they cannot do anything about it. Their various Masters have arranged it so.

Tallfellow is the most resentful.

"Wait and see. As soon as Stonedeaf is back, Stumpleg will turn up. He'll trick his Gounder and find a way to lead his goats in here."

When Belly is not around he gets lewd.

"Stonedeaf has got to be careful from now on. Can't trust Stumpleg… he'll do it to her, sooner or later."

"You'd do it too if you could!"

An embarrassed Shortie retorts.

"And what about you? Rather marry her than fuck her? She only has to call, and I'm sure you'll go running with your loincloth loosened up… what to do? All we do is talk. But others are lucky, they actually get to do it." Tallfellow sighs.

"What do you mean? Who?"

Tallfellow leans over and whispers into Shortie's ears:

"A couple of days ago, Mani came up to me when I was out with the goats. It was hot, around midday. He doesn't even bother coming close. He just shouts his question: 'Aiy! Where's that Stonedeaf?' I know he is up to something, so I ask him back: 'Why, Master, why do you want her?' And he says, 'Fucker! You want reasons, do you?' So I got angry and refused to talk any more."

Tallfellow shows Shortie just how he turned away from Mani. His face darkens with the memory of that afternoon.

"So, what happened? Why did he want her?" Shortie asks hastily.

"Why? Why does a dog run after a bitch? That's why! Haven't you seen dogs in heat? These gounder boys! They get to do things. He has money, he can talk to Stonedeaf nicely, buy her things. Or even threaten her with this or that. Us? What do we have? What can we do? That Stonedeaf doesn't even look my way!"

Tallfellow's face goes taut and he looks like he is going to cry. Shortie wonders why Stonedeaf cannot be a little nicer to him. Tallfellow has tried to be at his best with her, and yet she continues to scorn him.

"But you didn't tell me how you dealt with Mani!"

"First I thought I'd send him off on a wild goose chase. But you know him. He waits to get his own back and then it gets ugly. So I told him the truth: that Stonedeaf won't be back for a week. And you know what he tells me? 'Let me know when she's back.' But you know me, I'm not one to let him get away so easily. So I say 'I will, Master,' and then I lower my voice: 'You want to do it to her, don't you, Master?' Then he gets angry, 'Dai! Mind what you say!' But from his face I know he wants to. 'Shall I tell your father, Master?' You should have seen how things changed! Started begging me not to go to his father! Little bastard!"

"These things only happen to you, Tally! No one comes to me with questions like that!"

"Ha! Depends on how you talk! Just mention this to Selvan and he'll want to do it too!"

"Rubbish! Selvan's not like that!"

"That's what you think! Everyone wants to do it! Everyone, I tell you!"

"Then what happened?"

"What do you think? Mani got all friendly after that. You won't believe it, but he even promised to take me to a film!"

Just then Belly romps back and they change the subject. Belly has a buffalo to take care of this season. Her Gounder Mistress has asked her to take the animal along and let it graze on the big green patches in the lakebed. It is a pregnant buffalo, around three months pregnant. It feeds all the time. Belly has to take it across the lakebed at least three or four times, from one patch of grass to another. And then around midday, it lolls about in whatever water remains in the puddles, stirring up the mud and slush. In the evenings, she has a difficult time dragging the mud-splattered buffalo home. It is heavy on her hands, heavier for the mud on it. While the goats are ready for home, it is not. It stands still

every now and then, and Belly has to use all her strength to pull it along. Even if she beats it hard, it refuses to move, until it is ready to.

"Dai, Shortie! See that bald tree? There are baby parrots in there."

"Where?"

"See, there. Down, past the Big Rock. I was walking the buffalo there and the big ones saw me coming and nearly attacked me. Went on flying around and calling in that funny way."

Tallfellow is excited.

"Come, let's go get them!"

"And do what? If it's a bird you can eat, that's at least something. But what do you want with these? Let the poor things be." Shortie is not eager.

"Come on, Shortie, let's go get them. I want a parrot for myself." Belly pleads.

Tallfellow sneers at her request: "My, my! We have a queen here! Want your own royal parrot in a golden cage, do you? And you'll feed it everyday I suppose, with milk and fruit? And coo to it..."

"Get lost, Tally! What do you know? My Gounder has thrown away his onion-holder. You know the one, it's made of iron. I'll take it home and use it as a cage. My baby parrot will be safe in there."

"And what will you do, my lady, once your baby grows up?"

"Let it go, of course!"

Shortie and Tallfellow burst out laughing. Shortie's mind jumps to the fortune-teller who sits outside the cinema hall in Tiruchengode. The old man has a parrot that picks out a card from the pile of fortune cards stacked in front of him.

Many people stop by him to check their fortunes for the week. Shortie himself has gone to the old man several times. The old man does not say much but his words, always clear and simple, are soothing. A person has only to sit in front of the old man, and the parrot starts beating its wings about its tiny cage—the one in which the old man carries it. It sticks its bright red beak, so strangely crooked, through the cage bars, and asks to be let out. When the old man opens the cage, it struts, a funny green bird with clipped wings. It goes straight to the cards, searches among them and finally picks one. It looks at the old man inquiringly. The old man takes the card and the parrot waits, looking at its master's hand. Shortie loves to sit by the old man and watch this drama.

The old man charges ten paise a person. But Shortie gets a discount. He pays him only five paise. He only has to say, "I have only five paise, grandfather," and the old man immediately reads his fortune for free. He runs his fingers thoughtfully up and down his flowing beard and then tells Shortie what his week will be like. The last time Shortie saw him, the old man had a request.

"Bring me a parrot, will you? I'll pay you fifty paise for it."

Thinking of that night, he turns to Tallfellow.

"Why don't we get hold of some baby parrots? The old man at the cinema hall said he'd give me fifty paise for one."

"So you'll sell a baby parrot and make money, eh? Enough to pay back the Gounder for the kid you lost?"

Tallfellow's cruel teasing reminds Shortie of the whole sorry business. He had been thinking about the lost kid the night the old fortune-teller asked him for parrots. His heart was full of baby parrots as he walked home.

Parrots. Green parrots. Soft downy creatures that he had once seen in a hole in a tree. There he was, taking them out,

one by one till he had them all, an entire troop. Then he gave them away to the old man who paid him with lots and lots of coins. He held these by the fistful and the morning after, threw them in his Gounder's face. After which he pranced away, dancing and singing.

He returned to the pen in that half-dream state of mind, with his head full of parrot cries. The next morning, when he was out with the goats, he went looking for the parrots. But sadly he found none. There were plenty of birds on the trees, but no parrots. He would hear a bird call out to him in a raucous voice and look up eagerly but the teasing bird would fly away.

He realised soon enough that he was not going to be able to catch all those parrots or sell them. And that he could not hope to settle his debt with the Gounder that way. Yet, the following night he dreamt of the birds. One or maybe two of them came to him in his sleep, taunting and screeching. He tried to chase them away.

Saddened and troubled by that memory and by Tallfellow's question, he looks somber.

"Dai, Shortie! Didn't mean to hurt you. I was just teasing. You don't really think you can repay your debt by selling these birds, do you? Forget it. We'll catch them anyway and give them away to the old man for free!"

Tallfellow tries to make up for his earlier bullying. They step on the rocks lightly and pick their way over boulder and stone. The goats are here and there, their noses wedged into crevices and dips, wherever there is grass. Belly follows them, keeping an eye on the goats. She wants them to stay within the rock line, for beyond the Big Rock are fields mature with ripening crop. She hits out at the stragglers who dare to stray. She does not want to, but she is impatient to get to the bald tree and the parrots. The straying goats follow her obediently, keeping to the grass between the rocks.

The Big Rock bears the marks of rain. Parts of it are overgrown with moss. The moss is no longer damp—it is dry, a secret dark green rash against the brown rock. Past the rock and around it, are small hollows in the ground, shaped like lamp-holders. The rain has washed the loose soil away here, leaving behind these scooped-out bits of earth. These are dry now, the sun has baked them since the rainy months. Yet, their insides are soft and cool and nice to walk on. The three stand and look around them, taking in the view. It feels like they are standing in a hollow cut deep into the earth. Their feet are damp from the fish piss washed into the soil by the rain.

They see several lines of palm trees. A few of the palms are overgrown with leaves and look weighed down,. The palms by the water have all died—only their tall stumps stand hung with dried fronds. Some trees have been charred by lighting. On the edge of the lakebed, perched on a hedge of thorny bushes is a flock of storks. As soon as the three walk by, the birds flap their wings and fly away.

Belly points to the bald tree. It stands on the edge of the lakebed, solitary and in a place that very few people ever come to. It is not a very tall tree and is all but bald, with only one dry leaf hanging from its head. The parrots are there, that is clear, maybe seven to eight of them, and they are clustered on top of the tree. But they don't stay there always. They fly away, return, sit around for a while and are off again to find other trees and hollows.

There must be at least two or three hollows in that tree. But where would the baby parrots be? Tallfellow shakes his head. He does not think it is going to be easy to get a baby out from one of those holes.

"So many fucking parrots! I don't think they're going to let us snoop around in there. They're going to peck our eyes out!"

"There must be two or three babies in there! Can't you get me one?" Belly is excited.

"We'll get you all three! You keep one, we'll give the old man the others." Shortie assures Belly.

Tallfellow agrees reluctantly, and they walk towards the tree.

"Two of us should stand down here and throw stones at the big birds. The other can climb up and get the babies."

"No stones, Shortie! They'll just fall on us or hit the one who's climbing. Let's just find some big sticks and frighten the birds that way."

Belly's suggestion being clearly more sensible, they search for sticks and find two tall castor stalks. Nice, round ones and quite long, and almost as tall as the palm itself. Their edges are still green. The flooding rain must have washed them in to where they lay. Tallfellow and Belly stand on either side of the tree, sticks in hand. Shortie, the best climber of the three, goes up. He decides to climb with his bare limbs, not using a band for his legs, for it is a short tree.

As he starts climbing, the parrots set up a scream. They sound angry and rasping, but also afraid and bewildered. They fly away from the tree, return, take off again. Unsure of what to do, they circle the tree in fright. They see an intruder making for their perch, attacking their hollows. They want to get at that piece of flesh on the trunk of the tree, stick their beaks into it. But they dare not. Long sticks swing at them, keeping them away from the tree and their young.

Shortie shivers. He is naked except for his loincloth and knows that but for Belly and Tallfellow, he would be pecked and gouged. He is also surprised. The parrots in his dream were not like this. They gave their little ones to him on their own and sent him away with warm wishes. But not these. He is afraid to even look at them, flying over his head,

determined, with crooked beaks. A parrot almost sits on Tallfellow's stick, then tries to fly past it and onto the tree. Thwarted, it flies higher and curses him. The other parrots set up a chorus that sounds like the cries of those whose huts have suddenly caught fire.

Shortie sees them—the three hollows. One is a freshly made nest, but nothing in there yet. The second is an old nest, but nothing there as well. He finds them in the third hollow, newborn birds, all downy and wet. They are extremely red and featherless. Hearing a sound and sensing movement near the hollow, they open their beaks, confident that it is their mother returning with food. Shortie's heart melts and his resolve drains away. Swiftly he climbs down and jumps off the tree. Belly runs to him eagerly but seeing him empty-handed her face falls.

"Not now. They're much too small. Let's come back in ten days' time."

The parrots return to the tree as they leave it, their screeches now a chorus of relief and happiness. They walk back with the birds' cries echoing in their ears.

"Belly, I promise. We'll come back in ten days!"

They walk to the spreading shade of the oonja tree. Where the tree stands, the Big Rock is long and smooth, good enough to lie down and sleep. From here they can see the whole of the lakebed. Waves ripple and slide in the square sheet of water near the shore. The goats have moved away from near the Big Rock and are picking their way back to the rock line.

Belly gets busy, pulling at the lower branches of the tree. She wants to collect a pile of oonja leaves to grind into a paste with a stone. Later she will later use the paste to wash her hair.

"Shall I pick some leaves for you two?"

"For what? Look at my head, there isn't enough hair to wash..." Shortie smiles at her.

"I'm not the type to wash like this," says Tallfellow. "I'll wash my hair when I go home." He shakes out his dry brown locks of hair, and runs his fingers through them.

Belly does not reply and continues to pick up the fallen leaves. Her hair hangs thick and heavy against her neck, like a bird's nest. She looks up, pushes the hair away from her face and gets up. She looks around and her eyes narrow in wonder. There is someone walking across the lakebed.

"Stonedeaf!"

She shouts excitedly and drops her leaves.

"Where? Where?"

Shortie and Tallfellow stand up too. Stonedeaf is still far off, a smudge in the distance, as she walks across the immense solitude of the broad lakebed. As she comes closer, Belly sees her face glowing in the yellow light of the late afternoon sun. How beautiful she is! Belly feels an inexplicable tug of sadness in her heart.

Tallfellow calls out to her, cups his fingers to his mouth and shouts. She does not look up. Perhaps she does not hear him. Then the three shout together. She looks around her, but does not quite know where the noise is coming from. Tallfellow takes his towel off his head and waves it like a flag.

"Here! Look up!"

Stonedeaf flashes a pleased smile at them. Not minding the slippery stretch of rock, the three slide, jump and run. She runs towards them too, and when they meet, it is like they have not seen each other in hundreds of years.

They laugh, she does too, and for a while all they do is laugh. There is so much to say, yet no one knows what to talk about. Stonedeaf has a small bag tucked under her arm. Belly is amazed at how she looks. She cannot take her eyes

off her or her clothes. She touches her skirt, her blouse, her skin. She cannot believe this is the girl she knew, who wore rags and castaways and followed her and the others over stone and water.

Stonedeaf's hair is carefully oiled and pulled back from her face and braided into a plait. She wears a bright yellow ribbon in her hair that flares out like a flower against her waist. She is dressed in a long purple and yellow skirt patterned with large flowers and a blouse made from the same material. Her half-sari draped over her breasts and shoulders is a deep mauve. Brand new clothes, with the smell of newness still on them. She looks as if she has suddenly grown, become a big girl in reality. Her face is bright with happiness. A small red dot sits on her forehead, between her eyebrows. Her cheeks are softly powdered. Her eyes are rimmed with kohl and look bigger than ever. Glass bangles jingle on her wrist, a string of black beads holds her slender neck. No more limp and tired, she looks healthy and happy. Her skin is a rich burnished brown.

She is embarrassed by their staring. She laughs, but shyly. Tallfellow and Shortie look at each other and exchange hesitant smiles that hover at the corners of their mouths. They feel odd, ashamed even, standing in front of her like that, in their loincloths, with their dusty black skins. They cannot go about with her anymore, they realise with sadness. She has left them and gone away, to a place where they cannot follow her. Will she ever come back, their old friend, and mind goats along with them?

Belly is still not done with inspecting Stonedeaf. She touches her face, her neck, lingers over the bright clips she has in her hair, and covets the chrysanthemum that bobs in her plait. She wants to hug Stonedeaf to herself and kiss her.

"Why stare so much?"

Stonedeaf breaks the silence. She smiles at them

affectionately. Even her voice sounds different, rounded, rich and musical. Belly is not sure how to reply. Should she continue to say, "you", as she always did, call her by her name, or should she address her differently, with the respect due to someone older? It is Tallfellow who talks first.

"Will you be angry if we call you Stonedeaf?"

"Of course not."

"Should we sit here or..."

They decide that it is best to climb up the Big Rock. Somehow it appears fitting that they should seat Stonedeaf under the spreading oonja. As they climb up, Stonedeaf takes off her slippers. These are shop-bought, and not handmade by chakkilis. Soft, bright slippers. She has a difficult time holding up her long skirt. Scared that she will slip and fall in the more difficult parts, Shortie holds his hand out to her. She waves him away.

"Forget it! This isn't the first time I'm climbing this rock."

As soon as they reach the tree, they spread themselves out and sit. Stonedeaf opens her little bag and takes out an oil-stained paper parcel. She opens it and spreads her wares.

"Eat."

They put their hands to the fried rice and jaggery rolls in the parcel.

"Eat as much as you want. Wanted to bring more, but you know how it is. Things get over fast."

"Want some?"

Belly holds out a roll.

"No, no. It's for you. I've eaten so much these past ten, fifteen days."

Sunlight bounces off her little nose-ring, making it glint. Shortie and Tallfellow come out with it at the same time.

"So they did that puberty thing for you?"

"Yes. My mother didn't want to, but father insisted. Said the family must do it, especially me being the eldest. He went to my Gounder and borrowed a hundred rupees..."

"For the eleventh day?" Belly asks importantly.

"Yes. I felt bad for that, those hundred rupees. But it was nice, you know. I was happy they did it for me. I ate well, many things, got a lot of gifts, many blouse pieces. Here, I brought you one of those. See if you like it."

She takes it out from the bag. A rich, satin green blouse, the kind that older girls and women wear. Stonedeaf has had it stitched for Belly. Thrilled, Belly looks down at her chest. It is dark brown, stained with sweat and glowing. Her breasts are almost there, her nipples taut. Belly does get a skirt and blouse from her Gounder, but she does not wear them for more than a day or two. She flings them off, god knows where, and gets back to her favourite attire—the faded red towel that she drapes around her waist. She wanders the fields like that.

"Wear it."

Stonedeaf hands her the blouse, her eyes resting on the younger girl's chest.

"I made it to my sister's size. Should fit. Wear a blouse from now on, Belly. People are funny. Not all of them look at you the same way..."

Shortie and Tallfellow look away. They feel disappointed. They had stolen a look at Belly when she lifted her hands above her head to put on her blouse. Her breasts are as yet little points, but they look beautiful. Damn Stonedeaf!

"I didn't mean you both. Aiy, Tally! Not even you. I was speaking generally. But look! Look at our Belly in her new blouse!"

Belly fastens her buttons and looks at them all. The blouse is a bit large for her, but it will surely shrink when it is

washed. She is proud and thrilled that someone has actually given her a present. She stands preening in front of them.

"God! We've never seen you without that child!"

Stonedeaf's brow darkens. Shortie wonders if he has said something wrong.

"My poor Mistress! She's having such a difficult time with the baby. I went there today and felt very bad. She almost cried, you know..."

"So you didn't go there to work today..."

"No. I'm not going to work anymore."

They remain silent. A crow's caw cuts through the quiet. Tallfellow feels joy swell his heart. Belly feels tears pricking her eyes. Shortie is not sure he has heard right.

"Not ever? And the debt you owe them..."

"My Mistress doesn't want me to leave. My father came with me today to talk to her. My mother came too. The Mistress was adamant, saying 'Look we'll sell our goats. She doesn't have to go romping with them. She can just stay at home and look after the baby for me.' But my father wouldn't have it. 'We can't let a big girl do such work.' My master came in then. He got very angry. 'So, if you're not going to send her to us, pay up!' And my father said, 'How, Master? We're yours, you know, where will we go, if you scold us?'"

"And then your Gounder agreed to let you go?"

"Catch him doing that." Stonedeaf draws her breath in. "He asked my father, 'So what about the money, then?' So my father said 'You know I have a son. He's ten years old. He's going to school now, but I'll send him here.' The Mistress didn't like this—he didn't want a boy working for them. Then my father agreed to send my younger sister over. And that was that."

"Your sister?"

"Matchbox. She's eight years old. But she looks big. Bigger than Belly. My parents were going to send her to work next year anyway. I suppose it'll be this year instead."

"And you?"

"There's work in the fields. Or else I'll go to Tiruchengode. To the rice godown. My mother says there's work to be done there."

"What about your marriage?"

"What do I know about that?"

"And your sister? When does she start?"

"Tomorrow."

"And she'll come carrying that baby?"

They all laugh.

"Have to go. My father and mother will be worried if I'm late. Said I'd come back soon."

"Not going to see Stumpleg?"

Tallfellow cannot restrain himself. Stonedeaf looks at him with a mixture of pity and affection. And then, almost as if she is caressing Tallfellow's face:

"You tell him when you see him."

She gets up and starts walking away. They stand around looking at her fondly. Tallfellow runs after her and catches up.

"Not angry with me?"

After she is gone, the Big Rock looks empty. How she came, just like that, like surprise rain, thinks Shortie. Belly laughs happily.

"When I become a big girl, I'll leave you too, you know."

Shortie stares at her, his face blank.

"And me?"

Fifteen

He realises that the others have gone and he is all alone. It is the middle of the day, and the sun is right above his head. He cannot lounge on the rocks anymore. The glimmering square of water in the lake appears inviting—as if it wants him to come to it, as if it desires to swallow him. He comes down the rock line and then scrambles up it again. He does this several times, to shake off the laziness in his bones. If he has work to do then he finds it easy to forget everything, to dust away the stray thought that troubles him.

The goats are below the Big Rock, under the wide shade of a neem tree. He does not like the sight of the goats these days. They appear a shrunk lot, fewer in number. He looks past the lake and its square of water to the path from the fields. His gaze sweeps the land's expanse and returns to the path. No one. He is disappointed. It would not have been so bad if Belly was around. Or even Tallfellow. Couldn't he have come at least?

The fields are overgrown with crop, now as tall as a man. His friends have disappeared into that green. There are the mynahs though, wandering, chattering. The stork and the crane are by the lakebed to stay. They have decided to make their home here. Water hens duck in and out of the water and do not seem to tire of paddling. There are other noises that echo around the lake, indecipherable yet acute. The sound of a snake swallowing a frog. A frog's disconsolate chanting. An unknown bird calling to its mate.

So many creatures, he thinks. Today for some reason he is alert to them. He is with them, part of what they are, yet he is also afraid. Scared of what, he is unable to tell. Strange

thoughts, and he does not like them. He walks towards the kiluva tree, whose top is almost covered by the kundumani creeper. The creeper bears round pods that burst when they are ripe, and drop tiny red and black beads. Black at the tip and red below. Shortie collects the beads from the broken pods. When he has a handful, he deposits them on a rock and comes back for more. He brings down ripe pods and breaks them open. He does this until there are no more pods left, except the unripe ones.

After a while, the rock is heaped with beads. Shortie sits down and squirms as the heat burns his bottom. He hears the goats bleating and looks down. Some are still sleeping, but a few are up. His goats—all of them, but Veeran.

Tears choke his throat. The thought of Veeran fills him with pain. His Veeran, the star of his flock. Dignified, majestic. Veeran had a walk all his own. He understood everything, only he couldn't talk. He knew and followed Shortie's commands, knew when his tone dropped with love, was suffused with anger. He was really the leader of the flock and kept alien he-goats at bay. Veeran, all of three years old.

Veeran's mother had a difficult time bringing him into this world. He was her first-born. Even though her waters burst, it was a day before the kid could be extracted. Just two tiny limbs alone stuck out—his hind legs, and two soft hooves. It is best if the kid comes out head first, but it looked like the head was stuck sideways. The mother suffered. She lay down, stood up, tried her best to push the kid out. After a while she got tired and stood dejectedly, her head grazing the earth. From time to time she would moan softly, clearly in pain.

Nobody expected the kid to be born alive.

Someone suggested that the Odakkattu Gounder be called in. He was supposed to be over a hundred years old and

had seen many goat births in his time. But when he was asked he refused to come. He could not see well these days and hobbled about with a stick. If he were to fall down and hurt himself, he would suffer—there was no one to nurse him, see him through a long illness. But when Shortie's Gounder begged and cajoled the old healer, he gave in reluctantly and agreed to help.

"But bring her here. I'll see what I can do."

The she-goat had never been on a leash before. When they slipped one over her neck, she grew fearful and snapped at the leash. But she would not walk with them on her own either. Finally the Gounder held the leash and Shortie half-carried, half-walked the suffering goat to the old Gounder-healer.

One look at the suffering beast and the Odakkattu Gounder shook his head.

"This is a tough one. Your luck if I manage to get the kid out. Pray. Pray all you can to Munisami. Pray that if the kid lives and is male, you'll sacrifice him to the god when the time comes."

Shortie's Gounder then turned to the west, the direction in which Munisami's temple stands and muttered something under his breath. Then he fell flat on the ground, throwing himself at the old man's feet. After this, it is not clear what happened. Perhaps the god Munisami heard the Gounder's prayers, or perhaps there was magic in the old hand that felt its way into the goat's birth-canal. But the kid's head turned and out it came, sliding and slithering into the castor-oiled hands of the Gounder healer. A nice plump male kid. Shortie's Gounder immediately pledged it to the god. Since it had survived in its mother's womb for over a day even after her waters had burst, Shortie named the kid Veeran, the brave. His Gounder did not like the name.

"What's Veeran? What kind of a name is that?"

Shortie was careful not to use the name Veeran when the Gounder was around.

Veeran followed Shortie around right from the start. In fact, he hung about Shortie's legs more than he did around his mother's. Shortie cuddled and pampered him, held him in his hands, fed him the choicest bit of stalk and leaf that he could find. Veeran was inseparable from Shortie until the time he became attracted to other smells—the smell of goat piss, and goat flesh. Then he started to run after she-goats and kids, sniffing at their behinds, rubbing himself against them.

"Veeran!"

At such times, Shortie's angry shouts had no effect on him. He would look up but sniff his way to the herd. This pained Shortie, filled him with a sense of loss, as if he had been forced to relinquish a cherished child. He felt alone, with no one to talk to. As the days rolled on, he saw Veeran lust more and more, saw his member grow stiff and erect. He eagerly watched Veeran go at the she-goats, making them pregnant. He learned to let go and consoled himself. From then on, he only shouted at Veeran and never once raised a hand against him.

Veeran was indeed special. Had he not saved Shortie from Munisami's wrath the time when Shortie had put up a pen on the god's hunting path? Had he not interceded for him? But for Veeran, he would be dead by now. Had Munisami raised his little finger, Shortie would have been pinned to the ground the next instant, spitting blood. How Veeran argued. How he stood shaking his head this way and that, as if he were a lion and his neck a lion's mane. The very next day, Shortie had moved his pen off the god's path.

That Veeran is now gone. Gone back to the god he once spoke to. Offered up to him. Now he is one of the many lives

that attend on the god, enslaved by his love.

Once a year, during the late monsoon rains, ritual offerings are made to Munisami. Pongal rice is cooked in his temple and made over to him as a gift. And on the same day goats are sacrificed to the god. With other gods, rice can be cooked and offered one day and sacrifices carried out on another day. But not so for Munisami. He has to be given his bloody due the day that pongal is offered.

A day of offerings at the Munisami temple is a grand affair. People from several villages come in for the festivities around that time. And each of them offers the gods their own sacred rice, cooked for the most part near where the gods are.

The two Munis are deep inside a grove. They sit all alone, in the silence of the woods. In front of them stands an ancient poovarasu tree, its gaunt branches forming a canopy over their heads. A row of spears is planted in front of the gods. The spears have bells tied to them and when the wind blows, they set up a tinkling chorus. Next to the Munis are two clay horses, reaching up to their shoulders—a fearsome spectacle bound to frighten anyone straying into the grove of the gods.

Shortie wonders how the Munis stay in the grove all by themselves, unafraid. On the day and night of the festival, the grove is different. It is full of people and it is hard to find a spot to set up a stove to cook the sacred rice offering. Over fifty goats are slaughtered that day.

Shortie did not sleep the whole of the night before the offerings.

The October rains were not heavy this year. A fine, steady rain, like a child's complaint, but not too much of it. It was as if the god had willed the usually dense rains to turn gentle and inviting. Every year, when the sky pours and the rain gushes forth, people wonder why on earth the god Muni

wanted his sacred offerings in this month, with its never-ending showers. Yet they would come, sacks over their heads, stoking a reluctant fire and making their pongal. The festivities suffer though, and song and dance have to wait for a clear day. But not the fireworks. They are let off in spite of the rain and sparklers light the evening sky continuously.

For this year, a kurathi and kuravan act had been arranged. The man who played the female part, of the kurathi, danced splendidly. His elaborate steps kept time to an unending rhythm. He wore breastplates to mimic a woman and whenever anyone wanted to cheer him on, they went up to the dancing man and pinned a few banknotes to his enormous cardboard breasts. He greeted them lewdly when they did this:

"You've learned to prick well, haven't you?"

The man who played the male part, of the kuravan, was equal to his lady's antics. He pranced up to an old man and pointed to him.

"This ancient has had plenty of pricking. I'm sure his prick is sharp… isn't it Uncle?"

The old man smiled shyly and everyone laughed. The kuravan continued.

"It's a punch, his prick. Such a strong punch that the people of the seven villages who are gathered here to see us dance, and the women that have come with them..."

Here he winked at the women.

"...and the gounders with their goats ready for sacrifice..."

"Aiy! What about the gounders? Do they prick as well..."

"The gounders? You want to know how they do it? Please, let not the great gounders mistake me, these are great gounders—look at how they pound the rice and kambu, the corn and millet! And why do they pound well? You see they

have great long pestles..."

The women grimaced, some laughed and hid their smiles by covering their mouths with their sari ends. Shortie was there too, so was Tallfellow, but they were sitting a little away in the fields, outlying the grove. It was a bright night with the moon shining at its best. So bright and hard that it seemed like day rather than night. Veeran stood near them, tied to an aavaaram bush. They had to drag him from the pen to the grove. Shortie held him by a crude leash, while Tallfellow prodded him behind with a stick to get him to move. Veeran's neck had not known a leash until then.

They were all there, Shortie's Gounder Master, his Mistress and Selvan. But they were busy inside the grove, making pongal and watching the dance. Shortie and Tallfellow were of course not allowed into the grove, now that the festivities had begun. No untouchable chakkili was.

But the grove was theirs on other days. On ordinary days it was deserted except for the squirrels and the garden lizards that scurried lazily through it. The stone lamp-holder stood innocent of lamps, gathering dust and dirt. The ground near the Munis was always thick with un-swept leaves and flowers. Shortie and the others loved to play with the bells on the Munis' spears. Some spears had as many as six or seven bells and they would remove a bell or two and tie it around the necks of their favourite goats. Most of all, they loved the low swing hanging from the poovarasu tree. They took turns to sit on it and swing, slowly first, then fast. Belly loved this most of all and would sit cross-legged on the swing and demand to be pushed faster and faster. But they knew that they would be skinned alive if they were found out, and were always careful.

Once Belly and Shortie had climbed onto the raised platform on which the two Munis sat and tried to twirl the gleaming moustache of one of them. Close to the god, they

stared into his eyes and found him staring right back at them. Frightened they were doing something wrong, they hastily climbed down.

If only they knew all this, thought Shortie waiting with Veeran. He was angry because he was kept away from the grove at this time. If he or any of the others dared to get close to the festivities, if they tried to peer into one of the makeshift shops that had come up, they were chased away.

"Bloody chakkilis! What does a chakkili want with a temple festival? Get out! Out!"

So here they were, out in the fields. Tallfellow had to keep any eye on the hens and cocks his Gounder intended to sacrifice at the temple. Feet trussed up, they lay by his side. There were other chakkili boys scattered around the fields, waiting with their Masters' sacrifices. From where they sat, they could see the grove—a huge patch of glowing yellow light. Yet they could not see into the grove, because of the hundreds of people in the way. Through the chinks of light from the petromax lamp that escaped this huddle of limbs and legs, Shortie got a brief glimpse of the kurathi dancer's intricate steps. But he could hear the dancers well, for they were loud. He and the others laughed at their jokes, especially at their prick-and-pound stories.

Tallfellow teased Shortie.

"Think you can pound as hard..."

"As hard as you, if you want to know..."

"Ah ha! Can you do it as hard as your Gounder does..."

Cackling at his own lewdness, Tallfellow walked away to borrow a bidi from one of the other chakkili boys. He returned and handed one to Shortie. Shortie was not sure if he should smoke. What if his Gounder found out? He would be flogged right there.

"No."

"Come on! Your Gounder's not around. Why the hell are you always afraid? Besides he's busy trying to hold his prick back—it jumped out, hearing the kuravan's song. "

The kuravan was singing:

Tell me, girl
What is the fruit that grows on that stick?
O that, that is a guava fruit, my man
The fruit on the stick is a guava fruit
What is it that pushes in and pulls back
Pulls back and pushes in again, girl?

The young people in the crowd laughed aloud at this. Encouraged, the kuravan repeated this line three times. He used his hands eloquently to indicate how something pushes and stops and pushes again, and sent the young into further titters.

Oh, that's but the toothache, my man
Nothing but the toothache.

And they danced on, the bells tied to their ankles keeping time to the rowdy whistles that rent the air. Shortie accepted a bidi from Tallfellow and sat with his back to the grove.

"What a shit-scared dog you are!"

Tallfellow kicked his bottom from behind. Shortie hurriedly smoked his bidi. Just then the lamp went out and he heard the sounds of people massing around it, trying to make it work. But no one appeared to be seriously worried because the round moon was still above them, and the fields lay awash with light.

Tallfellow moved away. Shortie wondered if his restless friend had actually dared slip into the crowds. He stretched out, resting his head on Veeran's side. Veeran was not standing anymore but lying down and chewing cud. Shortie drifted into sleep.

He woke up frightened. A heavy kick had landed on his

side. The Gounder towered over him.

"Dai! Up! And bring the goat around!"

Shortie sat up and looked around. There was Veeran, calm and comforting. He had not moved at all for the time that Shortie's head rested on him. He had let him sleep on while he chewed cud steadily. Shortie felt his eyes go moist.

He bent down and untied the knot that held Veeran to the bush.

"Veeran!" His voice came out a slur, choked. "Veeran!"

"Dai! Enough cuddling about."

The Gounder prodded Veeran to stand up. Shortie got up too, and found himself looking into Veeran's bright, clear eyes. As the goat angled his head to look up at Shortie, the moonlight made his eyes glow. What was Veeran thinking of? Shortie felt a great urge to hug him, put his hands around his neck and weep. Cry to his heart's content.

The Gounder tried to get Veeran to move.

"Can't you help? You buffalo! Come on!"

The goat stayed still. Selvan ran up to help his father, and together they pushed, prodded and dragged Veeran along. Shortie stood rooted to where he was.

"Shortie!" The Gounder's voice came at him from somewhere far away. "Shortie! Stay at the cow pen tonight. We'll join you there later."

The goats and fowl would be sacrificed soon. Men walked in and out of the grove, some carrying frightened birds, others prodding goats. Suddenly a cock crowed. An odd sound on a moonlit night. A jesting voice floated through the air:

"Crow all you can. After all, it's your last crow on this earth!"

Then the sound of goats. Was that Veeran? No. Not that cry. Another plaintive bleat. Perhaps this was him. Sounded

like him, yes, indeed, it was him. Or was it this one? Goat cries flooded Shortie's ears, and to him they all sounded like Veeran's singular bleat. He moved away, not able to make sense of it all.

Shortie walked behind the temple and towards the road that would take him to the cow pen. Someone almost ran into him, running, dragging, half-carrying a goat.

"Brother, know if they have finished anointing all the sacrificial goats?"

"Don't know…"

His voice sounded as if it was not his own. A woman came up behind the man, complaining.

"How many times did I tell you to catch hold of that goat before sundown! Did any of you dogs listen? I shout and you are all deaf! And now see what happens. Supposing we miss sacrificing this year, then that's it. It is not any old god that we have pledged the goat to. It's the Muni. And if we don't make it, we have to put up with this creature for another year."

He would not have minded taking care of Veeran for another year. Or for all his life. Veeran was no trouble. He walked on, wondering why the road snaked and wound its way endlessly. He was thankful for the moon and consoled by its soft light. They would have finished anointing the goats. The anointed ones must have shaken their heads, expressing their desire to be sacrificed. If a goat that had been anointed did not do that, if it tried to jump or kick, then the owners of their goats would fear the Muni's wrath and beg him for forgiveness. They would then call upon the god to absolve them of their sins and accept their offerings. Once this was done, the fretful goats calmed down and shook their heads. After which it all ended.

Veeran would not have jumped or startled the Gounder. That much Shortie was sure of. In his own dignified way, he

would have shaken his head. And after that, someone would have come and squeezed his throat tight—till his breath ceased, his ears fell limp and blood spurted out and the ground was spotted with bits of red.

The blood signified acceptance: the Muni had accepted the sacrifice.

As Shortie entered the cow pen, he heard the dog. A goat bleated from nearby. He had no desire to look into the goat pen. But he remembered to feed the cows. He picked up armfuls of straw and divided it amongst the cows. Then, he went to his sack. He wondered if he would be able to fall asleep. He tried closing his eyes. No use, there was Veeran, pushing his way into the dark too. He opened his eyes. A blue-white sky. Nothing there. He lay staring at it.

It was well past dawn when the Gounder woke him. He hastily looked up to see if he had slept for too long. The Gounder had finished cleaning the cow pen. He must have come back just before dawn, after the goat had been slaughtered and the choicest bits cleaned, divided amongst kin and taken home to be cooked the following day. He was not sure if his food for the day had arrived. His pail stood in its usual corner. It looked full.

Every morning the Gounder came with the food himself and poured it into his pail. He did not touch the pail but used a stick as a lever to prise open the lid. Once the pail was full, he closed it, again with the help of the stick. Shortie opened his pail, expecting to find pongal and perhaps some fruits. No such luck. The usual kanji and two balls. Yesterday's food.

He felt disappointed. He walked out of the cow pen and into the goat pen. He called out to the goats in an unnecessarily loud voice. Yet the Gounder did not say anything. He continued to be busy with his cows. Perhaps he was thinking of the feast that was to take place in his

house, to which his entire clan would be invited.

Shortie herded the goats together into a group and prepared to lead them out, hoping that the Gounder would call out to him, as he went into the fields.

"Aiy, Shortie! Don't forget to come early, come away in the afternoon and have a meal."

He waited around for a while. When no invitation came forth, he set out reluctantly.

"Off to the fields Master, with the goats."

He feels sad now, thinking of the night before. Tears flow freely down his cheeks. The lovely black and red seeds he has so carefully piled on the rock scatter as he squats on them and howls. He is glad the others are not there just yet. At least he can cry to this heart's content. He stands up and looks down. The goats are still in the shade.

He feels a surge of hate in his throat. He dislikes his own thoughts. How hateful he is! The night before he wept for Veeran and this morning he wonders why the Gounder does not ask him to feast on his flesh! So what if he has not eaten meat for months now!

The last time he ate meat was when the Gounder and he had killed a wild pheasant and taken it home. The next afternoon, he had a pail of rice and meat kozhambu. Not too much flesh even then, lots of bones and a bit of the pheasant's legs. After that he and Tallfellow had caught a white rat and killed it. That was odd meat.

In any case, why brood over something that he cannot ever have? In his home, with his kinsfolk crowding around him, why will the Gounder think of Shortie? Sometimes of course, they put away a bowlful of meat because it tastes better the day after. Maybe he will be given some of that. How can they possibly forget him, Veeran's keeper, he who had raised Veeran from when he was very little? On the other

hand, why must they remember him or Veeran? Especially Veeran. To them, he was no more than a male goat. A fine, plump goat. They would wonder at the meat on his bones, if it would have tasted as good if Veeran had not been offered up to the gods. Or if the meat would taste better if the goat was younger... who has the time or memory for Veeran?

Selvan. Selvan knows him and how he looked after Veeran. Why, Selvan could have remembered him at the time of the feast. Shortie's eyes stray to the path leading from the Gounder's home to the fields. He is waiting for Selvan. He has even planned what to say to him. He will show him that he is hurt, angry, turn his face away. But what if Selvan does not come? Why, he has probably refused, when they asked him to go and fetch Shortie.

"Why must I go just to call that Shortie? Let him eat when he comes for the night!"

No, he cannot hope for Selvan to remember him. He ought to know better, after that night at the cinema when the kid was stolen. How Selvan had persuaded him to go with him and how he had tried to make it seem that the stolen kid was not a problem. How he had insisted Shortie lie to his father. He is glad today that he did not take Selvan's advice seriously.

The night of the cinema had ended badly, of course. At first Selvan was upset too, but he turned over and went to sleep saying, "we'll see about it tomorrow". Shortie did not fall asleep. He could not. He knew that the Gounder would find out. It was best to tell him. He would be beaten. Shortie shivered. When he was angry, the Gounder could not be trusted to stay within limits. He just kept beating, first with a rubber thong, then with the rugged oonja tree bark. And once he started, there was no telling when he would stop. Even his parents pleading on his behalf would be of no use. Shortie shivered once more. He must somehow escape the

Gounder's wrath.

He had woken up before dawn. Selvan was still sleeping but for once he decided to let him be. He started walking and by dawn he was home, in the chakkili quarter. His mother was up already and stirring something in a pot. She was shocked to see him. Why was he here? Was he unwell?

Shortie stared at his mother, as if seeing her for the first time. He saw how the early morning light fell on her face, and how her nose-ring sparkled. His heart, already full and heavy, felt nearly burst. He pulled her down, hid his head in her lap and whimpered. She did not know what was wrong, but seeing him cry like that, began to weep too. Then, realising something was probably very wrong, she woke her husband. He did not get up right away, maybe he thought was still the middle of the night.

"God knows where you were off fucking last night! Your son's here crying and you sleep on..."

"Who? The older one?" He got up at once. "Now what?"

He did not sound pleased. Then seeing Shortie in tears, he asked him, in a more tender voice, what was wrong. Shortie was scared of what his father would say, but he decided to tell him the truth.

"What a fucking idiot you are! How could you trust a gounder boy? What the fuck do they care? Now you're the one facing the Gounder, not him!"

"Never mind all that. Don't worry, love, we'll pay for that missing kid."

His mother reassured him. That very day, his mother and father, along with two others from the neighbourhood, left for his Gounder's house. By the time they got there, it was late morning. Shortie hung on to his mother's shoulder, afraid to even look the Gounder in the face.

The Gounder let loose the minute he saw them.

"Dai! Where the hell is your son? Where's that fucking dog? Can't trust him with anything, eh? He's gone and lost a precious kid!"

Selvan was there, his face swollen. The Gounder must have beaten him. He was sitting in a corner of the front porch. Shortie's mother fell at the Gounder's feet.

"You're our god! You must forgive us!"

Just then the Gounder Mistress emerged and added her share of complaints. Shortie were a no-good, a layabout, it was a waste employing him. Shortie felt anger and shame bite his throat. But he did not say anything. Rama Chakkili who had accompanied Shortie's parents said:

"Master, your son, the young Gounder. It was he who persuaded our Shortie to..."

At this the Gounder's rage grew.

"Have you chakkilis ganged up to attack me? Let me ask you this: who is responsible for the goats? My son or him? This fellow goes to school, what the fuck does he know about goats? I send him along because the goat pen is far from here and I don't want your Shortie to be alone! But what does this dog of a Selvan know about goats? Or about a goat pen? And if he comes up with some nonsense, why does this rascal listen to him? If Selvan asks him to eat shit, will he do that as well? What are you lot going on about?"

"Master, my Shortie is also a mere boy..."

"So. I agree. He's a small boy. Then why the hell do you send him to work?"

Shortie's father could say nothing to this. Shortie's mother sniffed loudly. The others remained silent. The Gounder spoke again.

"If I'd got hold of the rascal myself today, I'd have torn him apart, hacked him to pieces. Call him a small boy? He's been working for me for five, six years now. Surely he knows

that you don't leave a goat pen unguarded. Small boy indeed! Get him married and see what happens. He'll father a child in no time."

The Gounder's tone spat sarcasm. He spoke as if he alone was right, as if only he could be right, and all others were wrong. Shortie's parents realised they had no choice but to beg and plead with him.

Shortie felt relieved. He had somehow escaped the worst. He was also glad that he had not heeded Selvan's advice.

"Master, he's made a mistake. Consider his age and let him be. A man like you—it does not become you to punish him. You are our lord, you feed us our daily meal... forgive us, Master, forgive us,"

"And take back a lad who loses goats as he pleases? Last night he went to a film, tomorrow he might just may walk off to town in the middle of the day. How can I trust him with my goats?"

"No Master! He won't Master, he won't do it again. We'll talk to him."

"Two weeks ago a man came asking for this kid. He offered me a hundred and twenty rupees. I told him to get lost. If I were to sell the creature now, I'd get at least twenty rupees more than that. But let that be. You have to pay me for the missing goat, but I'll only take a hundred."

The chakkilis pleaded and cajoled, asked him to settle for a lesser sum, but the Gounder wouldn't relent. They had to give in and agree to pay the amount within the next few months. Selvan remained quiet throughout. Perhaps the Gounder had instructed him to remain silent. Later, after many days, Selvan came up to Shortie.

"Don't worry, I'll get you the money somehow."

But of course nothing came of his promise.

Shortie snaps out of his reverie and looks up. The goats

are on the water's edge, chewing at the thick, wild grass that grows there in abundance. Shortie joins them. He likes to walk along the broad shoreline that rises gradually from the ground and then narrows as it reaches the top. From the top, the nearby town of Ayyangoundanpalayam is visible. Shortie feels happy being up there, running up and down the shoreline. Selvan, meat, the Gounder, Veeran—they do not bother him any more, they appear to have fled his mind.

He stares at the lake, at the storks snapping up small fish. The storks, feeling observed, take wing and fly. One of these days, when Stumpleg is around, I must ask him to fish, he thinks. It'll be nice to dry the fish in the sun and roast them.

Absentmindedly he plucks the yellow poolai flowers that grow wildly everywhere and throws them up. They bob in the air, soft yellow clouds that float high and then sail to a faraway place. He picks up a bunch of flowers and flings them with all this might at the sky. They sail down gracefully, turning over like little umbrellas that can't hold against the wind. Shortie smiles at the fallen flowers and bends down to gather more. They look lovely as they cleave to the air. They linger there a while, then float down only gradually. He throws up another bunch and watches it float down to the water's edge. He runs after his flowers, across and down the slope, and suddenly stops.

Selvan. By the edge of the lake, near the square of water. Selvan has a closed pot in his hand. And a plate on top of it. Shortie's eyes scan the horizon. The sun is almost down and the western sky is tinged with the approaching black of dusk. His jaw tightens. Something in him dissolves and the happiness of the moment is frozen. He feels brooding anger creep up his throat. How much nicer it would have been if Selvan had not chosen to come at this time.

Selvan walks carefully to where Shortie is, making sure

that his tread is firm on the slope. His face and arms glow with sweat.

"So. Here's the great man who needs someone to fetch him his lunch... you knew that today was the day of the meat. You could have remembered to come home in the afternoon..."

Selvan is both excited and anxious, and his voice is unnecessarily loud. Shortie comes back in an equally loud voice:

"Master, did I ask you to fetch my meal?"

"Shut up, Shortie! Don't act smart. I really thought you knew enough to come by in the afternoon. I was even telling my mother, 'Look at this fellow, he raises the goat all these days and now he can't come and eat!' And she told me to bring this to you..."

"But Master, she already gave me my food for the day. See... the Master gave me my pail in the morning. So why would I come in the afternoon?"

"So? My mother must have forgotten today was a special day and given you kambu as usual. And now you're angry?"

"Forgot, did she? I can see how she forgot..." Shortie mutters.

"Go get your pail, Shortie!"

"I don't want to eat."

"Don't want to eat? Why get all upset? Do you want me to ask Belly to come and feed you with her sweet hands?"

Shortie is stubborn.

"I don't want to eat Veeran."

"Oh, my!"

Shortie remains silent.

"Alright, so don't eat the meat. Here, there's some rice

and sambar, eat that at least."

"Rice and sambar? That's like eating shit!"

Selvan stands, puzzled. Shortie's jaw refuses to relent. Selvan puts the pot down, under a stone.

"Shortie… want to play?"

Sixteen

Belly is breathless.

"They've caught Tallfellow."

"When?"

"Last night..."

"Where did they find him? Do you know?"

"No."

Shortie's face falls. The last two days had been wonderful and now this. An ineffable sadness steals into his heart. He wants to say something but finds himself tongue-tied. They must have beaten him up, and badly too. Tallfellow shouldn't have run away. He could have stayed and confessed and it wouldn't have been so bad. They might have even forgiven him. On the other hand... who knows? They might have equally beaten him to death.

Stonedeaf's sister Matchbox comes by with a herd of goats. There is no child on her hips though. She is small and obviously cannot carry that black butterball of a child all day. She looks distracted. Belly yells.

"Aiy, seen Tallfellow?"

"None of my business... there's a crowd in his Gounder's house. I don't know anything."

Matchbox talks as if she is a hundred years old, with her head cocked to one side, in the manner of her Gounder Mistress. Shortie wonders if he should go and find out what happened to Tallfellow. Not that he is overly worried. Tallfellow is smart, and can easily look after himself.

The goats graze peacefully on both sides of the mud bank that leads to the lake. Along the water runs a line of tall

dung weeds. The shoreline snakes on, calmly, effortlessly. The goats will come down and graze along the shore soon. All is well here. He need not worry even if he has to go away for two days. Besides, Belly and Matchbox are there and he can ask them to keep an eye on his goats.

"Shall I go see what happened to Tallfellow?"

"What'll you go and see?"

Belly looks at him sharply. Shortie does not know. But he thinks he has to be with Tallfellow. Be by his side, assure him that he has friends. He does not have to speak up for him. All he has to do is be there, make sure Tallfellow sees him. Tallfellow must be enduring it all, standing stiff and straight, like an alert and angry goat. His favourite pose. On the other hand he might be upset, sad. Shortie is not sure. One thing he knows, Tallfellow is strong inside and won't give in easily. Would he have dared to run away if he wasn't?

No one is sure how it all happened.

That evening Tallfellow was grazing the goats near his Master's fields. Perhaps he had gone to sleep, or gone to take a shit. But for some reason he left his goats alone for a while and they got into a neighbouring field thick with corn. The corn sheaves had been gathered but the stalks themselves stood tall as a man's knee, and wonderfully green. The goats had a time of it, feasting on them. All the while Tallfellow was not to be seen. Cornstalks are not good for goats. Goats are known to drop down unconscious after chewing on them. This lot had eaten a fair amount of stalk and soon they were down on their knees and drowsy. Three goats died, of which one was pregnant. It would have borne a kid in two weeks' time.

When he saw what had happened, Tallfellow fled the scene. Ran down the lakebed and disappeared. The lakebed is full of bushes and thorns and hollows. Tallfellow's Gounder and his men thought he might have found a hideout

in one of the hollows and had decided to stay hidden, like a short-tailed fox. They figured he could not have gone very far and searched for him all night, by the light of their lanterns. From time to time, Tallfellow's Gounder called out to him.

"Dai, Tally! Dai! Come back! I won't lay a finger on you, I promise. Come out. Don't want you to get bitten. There are snakes in there! And scorpions. Tally! Don't be afraid! Come out, wherever you are!"

The Gounder's voice was gruff at times, at other times cajoling. But it was no use. The fields around echoed his varying tones, but still no Tallfellow. The Gounder and his men then dragged the three dead goats into a cart and drove to Tiruchengode, where they sold them overnight to a butcher for a throwaway price. The next day they searched again for Tallfellow, along the lakebed and over the mud bank, all the way to Sanarpalayam in the east and Naachipalayam in the west. Still no use. They searched for him in disused wells, for he might have taken fright at what he had done and thrown himself into one of those. A man even dived into the square of water in the lake and came up spluttering. When they could search no more, they called his grandmother in.

"Aiy, Oldie! Tell us what to do."

The old woman was distraught. The Gounder was unmoved.

"I'll search and find him. But if I don't, you'll have to pay up. For the goats and also the money I've paid you as an advance on his salary!"

His poor grandmother did not know what to do. But the Gounder was determined that the boy be found. He sent his men in all four directions to ferret Tally out. Not only had three goats died, he now had no one to graze the remaining.

And he did not want to pay for another lad. Finally, after a great deal of effort, they found him.

For the two days that Tallfellow went missing, Shortie was sick with worry. Fear gripped his heart and he couldn't swallow even a morsel of food. Tallfellow's Gounder bullied Shortie as well.

"I'm sure you know where he's gone! You must! He couldn't have gone without telling you! Don't you two go to the cinema together? You must have found a place along the way to hide, come on, tell me!"

Shortie could only listen, feeling an unnamed sorrow choke his throat as question after question was piled on him.

"Aiy! Stop that now! Think I'll let you go, if you cry?"

The Gounder lashed at his ankle with his whip. A searing pain shot through his foot and spread all the way up his leg. Shortie stumbled and fell. Shortie's Gounder intervened.

"Leave him alone. The fellow's been here all day. He doesn't know a thing, I'm sure!"

Tallfellow's Gounder dropped his whip, but continued to glower at Shortie. Shortie felt both wonder and fear. He was thrilled that Tallfellow had run away, fled the fields and escaped into the big world beyond. He was confident Tallfellow would do well, wherever he went. He was at home with strangers, and would be alright even in unknown places. They had searched for him for two days and not found him. Which meant that he was out of their reach. No more goat grazing for him. Other things now, nicer things.

Tallfellow would earn a lot and come back dressed in fine clothes one day. Why, he might even wear dark glasses like the great actor MGR. And then no one would know him. People might ask, "Who's this?" and look at him,

screwing their eyes into narrow points. And Tallfellow would stand there, leaning against a wall, smiling. He would slowly take his glasses off, twirl them and, look around him carelessly.

These thoughts embarrass Shortie. But that's what he wants Tallfellow to be—a young man in fine clothes, glasses and perhaps even a new haircut. He wanted Tallfellow to come up to him, when he went to Krishna Talkies next time, and put his arms around his shoulders. Shortie would look up and laugh. So would Tally. After the film was over, they would stroll away. Tallfellow would then take Shortie under his wing and show him places. Take him here and there to meet people. They might even go and visit a few girls. Tallfellow knew lots of girls and did things with them. Things Shortie could only guess at. And of course there were no goats and no more grazing.

Now there's going to be none of that. Belly's news has upset Shortie. He had not thought Tallfellow could be caught. He did not think he would be careless. God knows where he went and how they found him.

Shortie looks around. Belly and Matchbox are engaged in a sliding game. They are on top of the mud bank, getting ready to slide down to the fields on the far side of the lakebed. First one foot down and then the other. The slope is steep and it is both easy and dangerous to slide down it. Once you start, it is hard to stop until you hit the ground. Belly is particularly good at this, having done it many times before. She can easily run up the mud bank and slide down to the fields without faltering.

He is not sure he wants to join them. He wanders towards his goats feeding on the slope. A frisky kid runs up to him and smells his feet. A speckled creature, with patches of white on it. He picks the kid up, sits down and runs his hand over its soft down. It slides down his stomach and

buries its head on his lap. He knows the kid and has a name for it: Vellachi. He had not wanted to love it so. Not after Veeran. But Vellachi, being female, would be kept and not sold. The Gounder has told him this many times. So he gave into its affections.

Vellachi is soft and gentle in his hands. It is her colour, he thinks, that makes me want to cuddle her so. Just then Vellachi's mother calls out anxiously. Startled, the kid bounces down from his lap and returns her call with an answering bleat. Shortie tries to hold on to her, but she shakes him off and starts running towards her mother. Shortie sighs. His hands go limp and weary.

Shortie walks to the mud bank and reaches the top of the slope from where it drops down to the lake. Matchbox comes up running and laughing.

"Brother! Look!"

She is pointing downwards. He sees Belly by the shore, bending and peering at her feet.

"Belly's slipped... she tried doing somersaults..."

Belly comes up the slope slowly, a scowl on her face. Her face is dusted with soft red mud. She walks haltingly. Shortie does not laugh.

"What happened, Belly?"

"Nothing!"

Belly's face brightens and she laughs.

"Want to catch fish?"

Shortie does not really want to. He wishes to lie sprawling on the mud bank, and let the sun soak through his skin. He does not want to do anything. His body feels slack and listless. He cannot stop thinking about Tallfellow. Belly reads the signs on his face.

"Shortie! Nothing's going to happen to him. Don't worry.

His Gounder won't do anything to him, you wait and see. His goats have been kept inside for the past two days. They are feeding on the peanut haystack. But he can't keep them there for long. We might even see Tallfellow this afternoon. Just wait and see!"

"No, it's not about that..."

Shortie starts to say something and stops. Will Belly understand if he tells her that he has dreamt such dreams for Tallfellow? What if it had been her that ran away? But where would she go, wonders Shortie. Or I go, for that matter? To our homes, perhaps, but not beyond.

"Shortie! Come on... feel like eating fish today."

They set out, leaving Matchbox to keep an eye on the goats. Watching them go down the slope to the water, Matchbox stomach goes warm with jealousy. She wants to go down with them and play in the water. She does not know how to swim yet, but wants to paddle on the square sheet of water, keeping close to the shore. Now Belly has spoilt it all by taking Shortie with her and leaving Matchbox with the goats.

Matchbox knows she cannot abandon the goats and follow the others. The goats may not stray from the lakeside, but one can never tell. Especially after what had happened to Tallfellow. Matchbox thinks of those dead goats and shivers. She sees Shortie and Belly walking by the water, and going northward.

On the northern side are several wide holes, filled with water. These are full of small swift moving fish. Sometimes, there are big fish too, fish that have lost their way and fallen into the holes. Stumpleg once caught a fish as fat as his thigh in one of the holes. They had a feast that day. Today there are only small flat fish. They are easy to catch, but very difficult to clean. Their little bodies are full of shiny scales and reflect light like so many tiny mirrors. After they are

caught, they have to be rubbed for a long time against a hard stone before they are ready to eat. But they are luscious and wonderful to munch.

They choose a hole that is both deep and full of fish. They climb into it from different ends. Shortie takes off his towel and throws it across for Belly to catch on the other side. They spread the towel out and then sink it into the water, holding on to both ends. They come up empty the first time, but the second time they pull the towel up, there are five or six fish sticking to it. The fish jump up and down and nearly make it back into the water. But Shortie and Belly close the towel from both ends and fold it up.

Shortie takes the towel and looks for a small, shallow hole. He finds one and drops the jumping fish into it and returns to the large hole. They can scoop them out with their bare hands later. Shortie and Belly sink the towel a few more times, until they have twenty fish or more.

They clean each of the fish carefully. Shortie loves it when Belly and he are like this together and he is cleaning the fish and talking to her. She talks all the time. She soaks in so much of the world around her that she has lots to say. Happenings in the chakkili quarter, for one. She acts them out for him, the scenes, the conversations. Shortie finds her tales funny and laughs out aloud. He laughs so loudly that the timid waterfowl in the lake screech in alarm and fly away. He has forgotten Tallfellow for the moment at least.

He beats the fish against a stone and watches their scales scatter. Then they clean the insides together, throwing away the bad parts. The smell is awful but neither of them minds. Then they wrap the cleaned fish into Shortie's towel.

He wants to walk with Belly, arm around her shoulder. She prances past him, a broken aavaaram stalk in her hand. She looks like a dream, he thinks, watching her go by. He follows her slowly. She runs up the slope, as if it was an

easy ladder, and reaches the top. He walks slowly, step after step. She motions to him to hurry up. He does not want to. Besides, he wants her to keep gesturing to him like that hundred times.

His wet towel drips blood from the fish. The blood has stained it a bright brown, and the towel looks like it has been dragged through muddy rainwater. He enjoys the feel of the cool earth. He looks up from the bottom of the slope. The edge of the mud bank is tinged with light. It looks as if there is a sun hidden behind it, waiting to rise. Beyond the bank the sky spreads far and wide. Even if a tiny bird was to fly across it, the sky would look smudged, its emptiness marred. He aches for a bird. He starts climbing and with each step that he takes feels his heart grow lighter. When he reaches the top, Belly holds her hand out. He puts his hand out too.

"The fish."

He hands her the towel. He feels as if he has given her everything he has. Now he is as light as a bird, ready to fly. He looks around him and at the sky, and feels a deep stirring inside. He wants to become that tiny bird and fill the sky. He feels his heart pound faster, his blood go warm and for a minute he is all rapture. The sky surrounds him. Fluffy clouds float everywhere. Where there are no clouds, the sky is a pale blue-white, like a whitewashed wall whose coat of lime is peeling off. His heart lifts and takes flight beyond the pale blue expanse. He wants to peel his cover of skin and bones and pursue his fleeing heart across the sky.

"Shortie! Shortie!"

He is jolted out of his dreaming. The mud bank is on fire. The fire burns pale and blue, having lost its red glow to the searing heat of the day. This is no fire, he thinks, only night fires burn this bright. He sees Belly and Matchbox sitting by the fire, each holding a stick with a fish skewered on it,

which they dip into the flame now and then. The fish moving up and down in the blue smoke of the fire remind him of the fish in the water.

"Dai, Shortie!"

Belly is angry now. Almost spitting flame. He smiles and walks towards her. She throws him a smoked fish. It is still very hot and he cools it by juggling it from one palm to the other. He blows at it and when it is right to eat, pops it into his mouth whole. His teeth bite into its soft flesh, and he feels it dissolve on his tongue, like cotton candy.

Belly is still trying to catch his eye. When he does look at her, he sees that she is pointing to something in the distance.

The sun is high and it is a little past midday. To the north of the lake, where a bustle of palms marks the horizon, a figure walks behind a herd of goats.

Tallfellow.

From where he stands, Shortie cannot see if Tallfellow looks worse for his adventure. As always, his towel is wound around his head in a tight roll. His loincloth is a broad band in front and comes down as a limp tail down his bottom. So he is back, and Belly was right after all. Shortie feels his stomach tighten with jealousy. Matchbox waves her hand at Tallfellow.

"Brother!"

Tallfellow waves back, grinning. They run down the mud bank to meet him. Matchbox hangs onto his arm. They walk up the slope. Unable to hold himself back any longer, Shortie weeps.

"Dai, what's all this?"

"Shortie, why are you crying now?"

Belly laughs out aloud.

"Nothing… nothing."

Tallfellow's goats climb the mud bank and join the others. He puts a hand around Shortie and holds him close. His body smells of herbs. He is smeared all over with green paste. Beneath the healing herbal paste and all along his back, his bruises are visible—dark swollen wedges of flesh, turning colour.

"They beat you?"

Shortie is open-mouthed.

"Of course they beat me."

Tallfellow answers with the air of one who has seen many things and for whom the world holds no surprises. Belly splutters and then stops. She looks down, determined to keep herself from smiling at his superior manner. Tallfellow turns this way and that so the others can see his wounds. The skin on his legs has peeled and is badly bruised. His legs are a mess of puss and blood. They must have beaten him all night.

"What happened, brother? Why did you let the goats go?"

Tallfellow does not answer immediately. Then:

"I was at the edge of the Master's field as usual, on the other side of the mud bank. You know the place. A fallow field on one side and a patch of corn in one corner of the field. Fully grown corn, quite thick. And a peanut field beyond that. My goats were on the slope of the bank and I was standing guard at the edge of the cornfield. You know how it is. I just need to raise my voice and they listen. That day they were grazing in a straight line, all along the slope. The Gounder Mistress was cutting grass in the peanut field beyond.

My stomach had been churning all morning. God knows what I'd eaten, but whatever muck it was, my stomach had gone off. I had to shit so bad, I kept jumping from one leg to

the other! Didn't think I could last another minute. But the Mistress was there and in front of her... the thing is she could see me from where she was. So I thought I'd just run down to the lakebed, finish off and come back. Didn't think I'd take more than a minute. But that fucking minute was enough for the goats. They went for the corn..."

"And your Mistress! She didn't see them?"

"She? She was busy cutting grass. Wasn't looking out for the goats. As soon as I came up from the lakebed and saw the goats, I ran. You should have seen me! My loincloth wasn't even tied back properly... but those fucking things had already chewed on the stalks. I drove them out, and everything looked okay. Then in the evening when I was taking them back into the pen, they started dropping down. Just like that, one by one. I pushed as many as I could into the pen and ran. Didn't even think of telling the Gounder about the fallen ones. I just ran and ran. Wanted to catch hold of Stumpleg and get him to work his spell on the fallen goats..."

"And you found him?"

"He was there, in the fields. Breaking and packing castor stalks. When I told him what happened, he stopped what he was doing and began muttering his weird chants. 'Go,' he said, 'My spell has started working. Go, and don't talk to anyone on the way.' I ran back, and didn't dare say a word to anyone. Didn't even dare swallow my own spit! That's how shit-scared I was. I got to the pen and found them back on their feet! All except three. But those three had had it. No way out, they were gone."

"But if you hadn't got hold of Stumpy, all the goats would have died!"

Shortie is horrified.

"I know. He chanted a lot, all the time. And quietly,

without opening his mouth, inside, in his own heart. Imagine if I hadn't found him! But you should've seen the three that died! One was really pregnant, all soft and round. She was born in our pen. Good goat, plenty of milk. Her mother was a good one too. We only sold her after she was old and half-dead. This one was in good shape, a strong thing with huge teeth. Couldn't bear to see her like that, lying on her back. And the other two—one was first-time pregnant, the other was a male kid. Not even weaned, a cuddly little fellow. What could I do? It all happened so fast, before I could open and shut my eyes. So I just stood there for a while. Then I had to sit down… felt heavy as hell. Thought I was going mad!"

"Poor fellow!" Belly exclaims. "I'm feeling upset hearing it. Wonder how it must have been for you, seeing them lying there dead..."

"Then I thought: what's happened has happened. I didn't feel like going to the Gounder just then. I knew he wasn't going to say, 'Oh, Tally! How sad that this happened… do you know what it could have been?' The second he got over the shock he'd have tied me to a tree and whipped me..."

"My uncle told me they did that in some village nearby, They tied a boy to a tree and beat him till he died!"

"I know, it happens… and I was sure they'd beat me. So I thought: let me go get hold of my grandmother. But what can that poor thing do? She'd go straight back to the Gounder and fall at his feet. And then I'd have to go back and still get beaten! So I thought I'd just run, go somewhere. I ran through these fields, then up all the fields through Rajagoundanpalayam and to Tiruchengode."

"So far? You've got guts!"

"Not guts! I was shitting blood, Shortie. Couldn't think of going back, that's all. Didn't want to see the goats again

either. Remember what you always say, that the god of Tiruchengode hill will protect us? Well, I thought of that god and decided to get away. That Tiruchengode! What a place! So many people, going up to the temple, coming down, hundreds of them! You can just stand there looking and time passes!"

"So you went up the hill and hid there?"

"What's the point hiding there, Shortie? I had to find work, otherwise I'd go hungry. There's some kind of resting place for pilgrims at the foot of the hill. I sat there for a while. Plenty of beggars there. One of them looked like a holy man—you know the type, long beard reaching his stomach. Orange dhoti. Kept staring at me!"

" Wasn't it dark at night?"

"It doesn't get dark at night. There are huge lights strung up there. Big lanterns everywhere..."

"Like the ones we have in the pens..."

"Those are nothing. They've got really huge ones there. They fill them up with kerosene and pump them up."

"And this keeps them burning?"

"They burn all night. Now that holy man I was telling you about. He comes up to me and says, 'Hungry?' And I shake my head. Then he takes a handful of rice from his begging bowl and gives it to me..."

"You ate food that was begged for..."

"What do you think? I didn't care. Couldn't taste or smell anything anyway. He gave me another handful and I ate that too. Felt full after that."

"See! There are such people in this world as well!"

"He looks at me, at my loincloth: 'You a chakkili?' I say, 'Yes'."

"Didn't he ask you where you were from?"

"I wanted to tell him. But the man didn't want to know. 'Everyone has a tale. You have yours, I'm sure. All these stories are the same in the end.'"

"Strange man!"

"Then he got me a job!"

"In the night?"

"The next morning. In a shop that sold pig meat."

"You mean there's a shop there that sells pig meat?"

"Only pig meat. That shop sells only that, nothing else. One rupee for a quarter plate. And you should see the crowds there..."

"Did you work like this, in your loincloth?"

"Come here, Shortie. I'll tell you a secret! You can only work there if you take off your loincloth!"

"Get lost!"

"No, really. Listen, that holy man gave me an old dhoti. Also orange, like his, and I wore that. When the Gounder buys me clothes at festival time this year, I'm going to ask for a dhoti like that."

"You go all the way to Tiruchengode and you're still the same. A chakkili who wants his master to buy him clothes!"

"In the evening, the shop gets really crowded. Lots of orders: 'Quarter plate!', 'Half plate!' And I had to keep filling those plates. All sorts of fellows come there, wearing pants and shirts and everything... all to this hole of a shop. And that holy man eats pig meat too!"

"So how did you get caught?"

"Two days I worked at the shop. I knew they'd be looking for me, so I wanted to work for a few more days, then use that money to go off to Erode or Salem..."

"But you need to take a bus to get to those places..."

"I know that."

"I've never been on a bus."

"Listen up, Shortie! Then I bloody get caught, right at the shop! My Gounder's sister has a son. The fellow lives in Annimur. He must be a regular at the shop—I figured this out later. He turned up the third day I was there. I didn't recognise him, but he recognised me. Just jumped at me suddenly and got me by my hair! Bastard! One of these days, I'll... I'm waiting for a dark night, a new moon night. I'll beat the shit..."

"They brought you back that night?"

"And beat me. With that huge belt the Gounder has. It hurt like mad when they started... then, nothing. Got used to it!"

"And what did they say?"

"I have to pay for those dead goats or work free for one whole year. Looks like they'd already spoken to my grandmother. She must have agreed. What can she do? I tried saying I wouldn't work for free and the Gounder held me down and beat me. But I repeated what I said."

"You've got guts!"

"They said, 'Let's see about that. Now go take these goats out'. But I'm telling you, I won't work for free!"

Seventeen

The water in the lake is almost gone. It is a pleasure that does not last. The lake holds water for a brief sweet while and then it is all over. A brief joy, and the dearer for it. The lakebed is written over with shadows—the marks of water that once was. Bereft of its puddles and its usual square sheet of water, the lake appears forlorn and shrunk in size. In the fields around the lake are signs of the harvest that is to come and that has already begun in some places.

In the kambu fields, crowds of women, their saris hitched high, are busy with their scythes. The peanut too is ready to be picked, the corn waits for its reapers. Everywhere the grain is ripe and brown. The fields are at their loveliest when they sprout into green. They are beautiful too, when the first ears of corn appear. But afterwards, as the corn matures and is ready to be cut, the fields look suddenly old and drawn. As if they are ready for the beginning of the end.

Who likes things to end? But they do end, there is destruction waiting in the wings, and all that is left finally is sadness and desolation. The heart aches for the crop to remain forever green and waving in the wind. But the empty field is cold and the earth draws to itself the vapours of the air eagerly. This is a time between seasons, between fruition and destruction.

Belly and Matchbox chew on the kambu they pare out of the sheaves. Tallfellow has brought a huge pile of kidney beans with him. Shortie is empty-handed, though. Nothing interests him. He feels burdened by the season's sadness and is filled with a sense of inexplicable loss.

The goats are not their usual frisky selves. They do not like to feed long on the yellowing grass along the shores of

the lake. They amble along the shoreline that once appeared to stretch forever but now looks narrow and sorry. Some goats cling to the bank at the point where it rises up from below, snapping at the only bit of juicy grass that grows where there was once water. Yet even they move on. For the herding children, there is no resting place. They have to follow the goats. The goats can be called to order of course, but then they don't feed. They just stand and stare and look miserable at sundown, their stomachs barely half-full. And then everyone feels bad. As it is, the goats bleat for fodder in the night and have to be fed several times.

Tallfellow has had enough. He is done with pushing his herd ahead.

"I think we should move on, take them to the edge of Mannakadu… some empty fields around there..."

"But can we?"

"Who's to stop us Shortie? I drove my goats there last week. There's enough grass around. I don't think the fields belong to anyone. No fear there. And there are other herds too, from Ayyangoundanpalayam."

They follow Tallfellow and coax their herds to move along the lakebed to where the shoreline winds up and narrows into a cart track. It is an often used road and well-worn. There are fields on both sides and the track itself is of fine grey-white sand, like the soft sacred ash of the gods. They herd their goats into the middle of the track, so that they do not slip away into the fields. The goats trot along, bleating continuously. Matchbox is excited and runs ahead of the goats. She has never been to any place past the lake.

After they cross two large fields, they reach a deserted green expanse. It is a broad, wide field, almost as big as the lakebed, spreading for at least ten acres. It is completely overgrown with the kolanji shrub. Kolanji fruit are everywhere, in luscious clusters. Dung grass grows wildly,

and so does the tall stiff grass that goats love to scrunch on. Scattered in the shrub and amongst the grass are tiny blood red flowers, glowing like rare gems. The tangled nerratai creeper grows upward and sideward amongst the cow feed bush. Here and there palm trees push their way up through all that green. The palms have been unattended for months and are covered with dried sheaths that seem to weigh them down. The field is cut into uneven plots of land, divided by tall, broad ridges that snake across it.

In the centre of this vast expanse of grass and weed sits a broad black rock. It must have been used once for resting grain and hay bundles during the harvest, before they are carried home. Against the rock lie piles of sesame stalks, long since rotten. They are now a viscous mush and black with age. Castor stalks lie around too, neatly cut and packed. When, and by whom? In the far west stands a vaagai tree, with its wide, intricate branches.

A fertile field bearing the signs of what it once was. God knows who let it go to seed, who could be so hard-hearted as to let this flourishing earth lie fallow? It is bound to yield at a plough's touch. Perhaps the owners are wealthy and have no need to work... or lazy. But it is very odd, for no gounder likes to be known as one who failed to till his own earth. The gounders pride themselves on being good farmers. To them, letting a field go fallow is a sin akin to letting a fertile bride's womb go dry.

Shortie knows how gounders feel about their land. He cannot understand how a gounder could leave his land unloved and uncared for. Tallfellow launches into the land's history.

It once belonged to Athappa Gounder. He had two sons. They both married and had children. But they lived together, work and family keeping them busy. The Gounder wanted things this way: "As long as my time lasts, let's all live

together. Afterwards, I leave it to the gods to guide you lads". Athappa Gounder had acquired the land for himself through hard work. Earlier, he had been a household hand, in another gounder household, at a time when not only chakkilis, but even poor gounders worked for rich gounders. He cleaned the cattle shed, took the goats out to graze. Every time Athappa Gounder ate the food flung into his plate, he would die of shame. "He, my master is a gounder, and so am I, but look at me! I eat the food he throws to me. A man must have his own land, and I must make sure I do one day... "

Athappa Gounder did not stop with cursing his fate. He worked himself to the bone, saved up, and finally bought a few acres of land for himself. The man lived a long life. As soon as he died, his two sons started quarrelling almost at once. It started off as an argument. The money that the old man carried about him in a small purse on his waist had gone missing. The two brothers accused each other of stealing it and one thing led to another and they decided that they could not live together anymore, they must partition the land.

But how was it to be divided? The older brother wanted the larger share and argued that since he was the first-born he had superior claims on the land. Refusing to be outwitted, the younger one smirked and said that he too was born in exactly the same way as his brother and therefore could not be cheated. Finally nothing useful came of the fight. But as the brothers flung words at each other, the land suffered. Meanwhile, they took to working as labourers on other peoples' fields and the land lay deserted.

Shortie is thrilled to learn that the Gounder who once owned this land had been a household servant like himself.

Matchbox and Belly run into the overgrown field. This land! They must bring their goats here everyday. And the goats of course love it. They start to graze immediately. It will be evening by the time they move from the centre of the field to its edges.

Tallfellow and Shortie decide to walk around and see the place for themselves.

To the east of the deserted field is the cart track they have walked on, wide enough for a man to lie across it. To the south runs a long ridge, grown over with nerunji bushes, thick and thorny. They have to walk carefully here. They decide not to climb up the ridge, but walk along the field on its inside. On the other side of the ridge are fields thick with crop. The orange-brown stalks of the harvested kambu crop stand tall. Bean creepers are everywhere, tangled with the kambu, bursting with ripe green beans. But how much can a person eat? They have eaten so much of the bean that their tongues have lost their taste for its juice now. Why must everyone sow and reap the same boring kambu, beans and corn?

The ridge along the south side of the field tapers to become a narrow tail of a land and dips down to a ditch. Standing inside the ditch, they see the entire field spread out before them like a gigantic sari, fluttering its colours in the wind. The ditch is damp, full of water until recently and is home to the kuramata plants that grow in profusion. Shortie ploughs his way through the thick line of the kuramata to see if the fruits have begun to appear. There are several of them, round and glossy, but still green. A few have begun to ripen and turn yellow. Shortie is disappointed. They can't be eaten raw, or even when they are semi-ripe. Tallfellow laughs at his disappointment.

"Come, come, let's see what else we can get to chew."

Shortie is hungry. The kanji of the morning has dissolved into his body and he is left wanting something more. They walk west. Beyond the edge of the deserted field on this side is another piece of land, dense with cotton plants that stand as tall as one's leg. Further into the same field are plots green with corn. In the centre is a well, surrounded by a

small grove of around ten to fifteen coconut trees. Not the tall kind, but the short stumpy variety, the ones with their leaves hanging down. The red-gold of the coconut glows in the late morning sun. It is not yet midday.

Shortie stands, brought up short by the swelling coconut trees. They seem to beckon to him, with their long, hanging leaves. The tree trunks are smooth and brown, inviting him to lay his chest against them and climb up.

"Tally, think we can climb and pluck a few nuts?"

"Hmm... new place, no point in getting caught."

The taste of coconut water is in his mouth. Shortie's teeth long to bite the milky-white inside of the coconut kernel with relish. When did he last eat a coconut? Last year, when he had gone home for the village temple festival. His mother had given him part of a coconut that was earlier offered to the goddess. The coconut is not common here. It is tended only on a few farms. The gounders guard their trees jealously, for it is a difficult tree to cultivate on a soil that is dry for the better part of the year. If the rains fail for a season, the tree wilts and even dies.

Shortie's Gounder's house has a couple of trees in the garden. In the summer, the Gounder patiently brings his oxen to his well and hauls up huge loads of water for the trees. For all that, the nuts on those trees are not very big. Not much bigger than sparrow's eggs. As soon as the coconut starts to bud, the Gounder is alert and keeps a stern watch on the tree. Once the small soft green nuts start to appear, he climbs the trees every so often to shake them to see if there is enough water in them. As soon as they are full, he orders them to be brought down. And the family preserves these nuts for the entire year. Or half a year. The coconuts are plucked twice, in May and in November. On these two days, the Gounder Mistress makes idlis. For it is only then that they have enough coconut to make a nice chutney.

Stumpleg's Gounder has a large number of trees. Stumpleg often gathers nuts that fall with the wind and hides them. He shares them with the others sometimes, but never gives anyone more than a sliver of the white kernel.

Shortie and Tallfellow stand on the ridge which separates the deserted field from its neighbour and scan the horizon. It is a still afternoon. The plants and trees stand unmoving. The sun's rays struggle with the weave of leaves and plants ,before they are allowed to slide along the earth. Not a soul in sight, as far as the eye can see, no one around till where the field ends and is marked by a long and tall ridge. The well looks deserted, no one there too. Not even a shadow moves. A good time to steal.

Tallfellow however is not sure. Shortie is, and impatient too.

"No one around, Tally."

"I know. But still. A new place, we've got to be careful."

"Sure. But see, not a soul. They must have all gone home."

"Shortie, if you steal something growing in a field, you can at least run for it. But stuck there on a tree, you can't do anything if they get you."

"Don't come if you're afraid." Shortie is irritated.

"Afraid? Not me, but I don't like getting caught."

Shortie jumps down from the ridge and into the field. He is annoyed with Tallfellow. Tallfellow follows him nevertheless.

"Shortie! If someone sees us, let's say we came to drink water from the well."

"Tell them yourself."

"Why so angry? I didn't say I wouldn't go with you. Just that we've got to watch it."

"Alright, alright."

The field is neatly divided into several plots separated from each other by short tidy mud ridges. They are narrow, but you can walk on them. They are overgrown with grass that feels soft and ticklish on the feet. The cotton plants sit apart from each other, like a line of shitting men. This is a welcoming field with several paths leading in and out of it, dense with crop and foliage.

They reach the coconut grove. The trees stand fairly close to each other. Several water channels run from the well, winding their way around and out of the grove. Adjacent to the grove is a rough hut.

The path, on which the oxen circle when they haul water from the well, is at a slant. It runs away from the well and dips into a hollow before flowing into the field. The path is scarred by the hooves of the oxen. The hollow has some water in it. Tallfellow gets down on his knees and without muddying the water, scoops up a little in his cupped palms and drinks. Sweet water. Like the water of the coconuts. Shortie joins him, and drinks till his stomach is full. Beyond the line of coconuts is a solitary lime tree. No sign of goats or cows anywhere. They must be on the far side, beyond the ridge to the west. Perhaps they return only towards evening. Shortie is confident.

He stands under the trees and looks up at them. No point in going for the trees with the green nuts. They might be full of water, but he wants the ripe ones, with their smooth white flesh. Shortie sees a piece of rope under a tree. He runs to pick it up and stops to peep into the hut. Tallfellow stands a little away, keeping watch.

Heaps of coconut sheaths lie on the floor of the hut. He wonders if there are any nuts. Even if there are one or two he will take them and leave. No need to climb then. He looks carefully around and sees there are no nuts to be had. He kicks at an ancient cot standing in a corner. It lets out a

surprised screech. Tallfellow hisses to him from outside.

"What?"

Shortie's voice is unnecessarily loud. It echoes in the trees and startles a crow that flies out in a huff.

"Quietly, Shortie. And don't go breaking that cot. Then they'll know someone's been here. Enough. Come out!"

Shortie returns to the trees. There are two kinds. Some of the short trees are ready to burst into fruit, others hold mature nuts that are not yet fully ripe. The tall trees are heavy with ripe coconuts, large clusters of them He chooses the shortest of the tall trees. The nuts are easy to reach, and hang down invitingly. He takes his towel off his head, knots it around his feet and starts climbing. The coconut is not like the palm. It does not hurt the climber. But he has to be careful that his feet don't slip. He stops when the coconuts are within reach.

Holding onto the trunk with one hand, he stretches the other to grab at a glittering cluster. Nothing happens. The nuts are still not completely ripe. Middling ripe. He can't pull them off. He has to twist the stalk that holds the nut to its cluster and tear it out. He takes hold of the nut closest to him and twists it around a few times until it comes away in his hands. He looks down and sees the soft mud of the water channel. He drops the coconut down into it. It falls down noiselessly and sits squat on the mud. He does the same with another nut.

He looks down. Where is Tallfellow? Bloody coward, must have hidden himself behind a tree. He must get a couple more, each of them can carry two. That way there will be one each for Belly and Matchbox too. He twists around for his third coconut. The cluster has over ten nuts. When he is done with that and onto the fourth, he hears a voice yelling out.

"Dai! Come down here!"

Who is this? Not Tallfellow. He looks down.

"Dai, that cluster isn't ripe yet. Come down. We'll go look for a ripe one!"

An angry voice, thick with ridicule. Shortie's palms begin to sweat. He holds on to the tree, not wanting to get down. He cannot see where Tallfellow is.

"Rascal! Down! Chi! Come down here, you dirty dog!"

He looks down fearfully, trying to find the owner of that voice.

It is a gounder's voice, and one known to his Master. Shortie does not know that yet, but his master has had something to do with the harsh-voiced man.

Shortie's Gounder was once the proud owner of a calf which he raised with love and care. The calf was his own, not a bought animal, but born from a cow he had had for a long time. The cow was a beauty, with rich and thick milk. The calf was allowed to drink its fill and only the remaining was taken home. But even then, there was always enough to go around. The cow was a hard worker. Whether yoked to a plough or hauling water for the fields, she was energetic. Her horns were lovely, and marked her as a superior creature. They bent down like a garland around her face. The Gounder was often heard saying: "Only after this cow came, did my herd increase and my pots overflowed with the milk of life..."

He kept the mother till she was very old and toothless, and she couldn't chew anymore on hard fodder. She would chew on the green of the stalks and let go the remaining. The floor of the pen would be littered with tall stalks, bereft of leaves. The Gounder found it increasingly difficult to watch her suffer and decided to sell her. But he retained her last calf, the one he loved most of all.

It was his fancy that the calf was an exact copy of its mother. And it did look lovely, with similar garland-shaped

horns. The Gounder would feed and water the creature himself. He was glad that the calf was growing into a cow worthy of her mother. When the time came, he found a suitable mate for her and soon she was big with child. The Gounder kept track of the time the cow mated, and drew up a birth calendar for the calf-to-be.

It was the ninth month of the cow's pregnancy. Almost time. The cow looked beautiful as all first-time pregnant cows do. Then suddenly, of a morning, her stomach gurgled and she had severe diarrhoea. But no one worried over much. First-time pregnant cows are known to do this and it is taken to be a sign that the calf will be male. The Gounder was thrilled. He went about boasting that his dear cow's first born would be a male calf.

The cow got worse. Its stomach never healed and the diarrhoea continued. The Gounder got worried. A cow pregnant with a male calf suffered an upset stomach for perhaps two, three days, but not more. But this one didn't get better and there were only twenty days left until it was due to give birth. She seemed unable to digest anything, and would shit continuously, in rivers. The cow lost weight. Only her stomach looked swollen. Her eyes stopped glowing and became listless.

The Gounder couldn't bear to look at her. His neighbours turned up, offering help. Some fed the cow green plantain, others gave her melted fat from a pig's stomach and aloe stalks. The Gounder consulted all the healers he knew and faithfully followed their advice, but nothing seemed to work.

When it became clear the cow was not getting better, the Gounder agreed to sell her. He wondered if the cow's health would improve with her new owner. But prospective buyers took one look at the cow and left, shaking their heads in disappointment. Even those who traded cows for a living were not willing to risk buying a sick creature—they would

not be able to find a buyer.

The Gounder decided that he should keep her after all, maybe she would give birth to a healthy calf and all would be well. If not, she could be put to death painlessly and buried on the edge of his field.

Just then a man arrived from Ayyangoundanpalayam. Thoppu Kaattu Gounder. He liked the cow, and the way her limbs were formed. He had searched carefully for signs of ill-luck and found none on her body. He felt reassured by her horns. She should get well after her first calf. Of course, right now, she looked emaciated, but that need not last.

"So, quote me a price, Uncle."

Shortie's Gounder was taken aback. But he managed a composed reply.

"A good cow. Of good lineage. You've seen for yourself. She'll be fine by the time she's had her second calf... so..."

"I know all that. But look at her now. Looks like she'll fall over if I give her a push."

"Five hundred rupees?"

"What's this Uncle? Is this fair? Quote me an amount that I can pay."

"Four hundred? How about that?"

"No," Thoppu Kaattu Gounder was firm. "Two hundred and that's that. If not I don't want her."

"How about three? If you can't handle that, lets forget it. She can stay here with the rest."

They haggled for hours, but Thoppu Kaattu Gounder wouldn't move from his offer of two hundred rupees. And finally Shortie's Gounder had to accept. But he warned the other man.

"I am giving away the goddess of my flock to you. I hope she calves as many times as you want her to and fills your

pen. And who knows, one of these days, I'll come around asking for a calf myself!"

"That's the spirit!"

"But, remember that once I sell you the cow, it's yours. You musn't come back to me with complaints. 'She didn't prove to be good enough'. Or, 'I didn't think the calves would be such and such...' none of that. She's all yours and I have nothing to do with her."

"Why would I come whining to you, Uncle? I have a lucky hand and cows that I take into my pen do well."

"Maybe. But you know how it is..."

"You don't have to worry."

Thoppu Kaattu Gounder tried every remedy that he knew on the sick cow. But he could not find out what had got into her stomach. Had she swallowed a snakeskin, with her fodder? He gave her something for that as well, but still nothing happened. Meanwhile, the cow's term time approached. She tried her best to give birth without effort, but it was no use. The calf had moved its position and lay cross-wise and threatened to come out, legs first. The Gounder had to anoint his hands with castor oil and push a fist in to help the head turn.

The ailing cow continued to bother him. She was not feeding the calf. It did not seem like she would, or indeed could. He gave up and would get angry if anyone brought up the subject of the sick cow.

"Bastard! He cheated me! Spoke so nicely and landed a sick animal on my head!"

As often happens, the story of his irritation travelled and Shortie's Gounder came to know of it. He felt unbearably sad. Sad for the cow, especially, that she had not healed after all this time. But his conscience was clear. He had not lied to Thoppu Kaattu Gounder. He had told him the truth about the

animal. Why, the man could have said no, even then. His mind went over that day again, and he felt he had done right.

Shortie's Gounder and Thoppu Kaattu Gounder did not meet after that. Except on one occasion. It was a gathering, at another's house. Shortie's Gounder was seated on a cot. A petromax lamp burnt brightly by his side, lighting up his face.

"These days you can never tell. A chap sells you a cow under false pretences and then goes about as if nothing has happened."

Thoppu Kaattu Gounder had a smile on his face, but his tone was malicious. Not to be outdone, Shortie's Gounder, shot back:

"You knew she was sick. You trusted in your lucky hand. Thought you could cure her. And when it didn't work out, you blame me. Now who's going to believe your stories about your lucky hand, and your wonderful cures?"

Thoppu Kaattu Gounder was stung by this reference to his healing skills, which he valued highly.

"Dai! What the hell do you know about my cures?"

"Careful! Don't you call me 'Dai'!"

"Cheat! You're a cheat so you don't deserve any better."

"Mongrel!"

It looked as if they would start hitting each other. And just when things began to look very bad, onlookers held the two men back. But they continued to rant at each other.

"Leftovers-eating dog! I didn't get it for nothing!"

"What's two hundred rupees... a beggar's dole. Or is that all you have?"

The two left for their homes finally and never spoke again.

The harsh-voiced man who has caught Shortie while stealing coconuts is none other than Thoppu Kaattu Gounder.

Eighteen

Shortie sits with his head buried in his knees. From time to time his body jerks into spasms and the hair on his arms stands on end. His eyes are brimming over. Whenever he glances up, the light hurts his eyes. His heart thumps wildly against his ribs and ebbs to a whimper, then beats again. He sits with his eyes shut, he does not want to open them ever. Everything around him appears to shudder, keeping time to his wild heart.

He is a tiny insect. Around him wander scores of legs waiting to stamp him into the dust. There is no way out, no twisted path that he can follow and leave. He cannot save himself. He is afraid that one of those legs will brush against him casually and finish him off. He wants to strike his head against the earth and disappear into its bowels, seek refuge there. His body winds itself tight around him until he shrinks to a sharp point. But still they won't leave him alone. Those shadows, a host of them, chase him round and round. Finally he looks up. The dark sky presses down on his head. Anytime now, it could descend on him. He cries out in fear.

The food pail stands next to him. He does not want to open it. He thinks that if he does he will see it—a lone thin line of rope, leading out of the still mess of watery kanji that lies congealed at the bottom of the pail. He has tried taking a mug to the water pot, but felt his hand unwilling to dip into it. He thinks there is a fat frog at the bottom of the pot, open-mouthed and staring at him with its bulging beady eyes. He cannot bear to look at the goats. Their eyes seem pools of wild, splashing water.

Those rough-edged walls, with sharp stones sticking out, are always with him. They seem to want to hug his body,

like a close-fitting cage. And they follow him everywhere. He thinks they will get him, the walls, close in on him soon and smother his heart. There is no use running away from them. He is caught. The walls have come together and he is trapped at the point where they meet. They crush his bones and he breaks into pieces... Shortie screams and turns over.

He lies half-awake. Whenever he lies on his back, he feels that he is actually standing up and has gone to sleep, just like that, with his back upright. And then he wakes up afraid, and flings his hands about, desperate to hold onto something. But there is nothing there. He is floating now, all alone and in empty space. But his body is not light, it grows heavy and soon he is shooting down, down, down. He lands on a sharp rock and shatters into a thousand pieces.

There is only fear now, fear on all four sides. Fear is a monster, and its wide mouth is hungrily open, waiting to swallow him, tear at him with its teeth. He does not know where to go. There is nothing that he can hold on to, nothing that will raise him up. There is nothing left for him to say. And nobody. No words of kindness or mercy. He is alone. Without a thing of his own.

A hand falls lightly on his shoulder. He shivers but turns back to look. Belly. His body shudders and then becomes still. Grief grips his throat when he sees her face. She looks stricken and ready to cry. A whimper wracks his thin chest and tears stream down his cheeks. Since yesterday, he has not been able to speak. His tongue appears to have retreated into his throat. But he cries, silently, incessantly. Now he buries his head in Belly's lap. The sky is a pale white. Nothing stirs in the day's relentless heat. Trees and bushes have gone limp. The goats are in whatever shade they can find and stand in an intertwined huddle.

Last night Shortie had lain still on his sack. He felt dead. His eyes would not shut and his mind was blank. Swarms

of mosquitoes buzzed over his head and chest but he seemed oblivious to their sting. Now and then, his chest quivered and heaved. Poochi lay beside him and howled, as if the dog knew his pain and wished to share it. He felt choked with the dark, pulled into its depths. A starless night, whose blackness was broken by the occasional thrum of nocturnal insects. There was a bowl of food next to him. It remained untouched.

The Gounder had come sometime in the night and kicked at him.

"Our great man still doesn't want to eat, is it?"

He was still angry. Angrier, in fact. Shortie thought that he would be carried to the well once more.

"Bastard! God knows why I'm served this fate! Burdened with vermin who do nothing but humiliate me. Don't I feed you well? Have I ever starved you? Motherfucker! You gorge on my kanji thrice a day. Not to mention those buttery kambu balls. My wife might forget to cook for me, but never for you and your wretched Poochi. And what do you do? Go and steal a coconut! I should have finished you off, chopped you up right there."

Shortie barely heard what the Gounder said. Words flew in and out of his ears, with the random phrase sticking in his mind. The Gounder muttered and moaned for a long time. Then suddenly his voice rose:

"Dai! Dai!"

Shortie did not hear a thing. His ears were stopped with silence. With greater urgency and fear, the Gounder continued:

"Dai, Shortie! Dai!"

The Gounder was down on his knees and shaking him by the shoulders. He sat up gingerly.

"Mmm... not me... water... frog... not me... won't do it

again... ever again..."

He sobbed uncontrollably till his limbs went stiff and his eyes blank. His eyeballs would not move.

"Stop it, will you?"

But the Gounder's voice was shaky. He was clearly worried. He got up, went inside the pen and returned with a pinch of sacred ash in his hands. He sprinkled this on Shortie's head, all the while muttering chants. Shortie blinked as the ash got into his eyes. The Gounder smeared his forehead with the ash. Then he pulled Shortie by his shoulder and pointed at the bowl of food before him.

"Eat!"

Shortie slumped as if he was dead. The Gounder pushed the bowl closer to him and pulled at his right arm. It fell back slack. He then took Shortie's right hand and stuffed his fingers into the bowl. Shortie's fingers messed about with the food. But he still looked blank.

That afternoon:

"Thief! Bloody thieving dog!"

There was a man standing in front of the hut. The man with the harsh voice. Thoppu Kaattu Gounder. He was clad in a brief loincloth and a small turban. His stomach ballooned over his hips. Shortie drew his breath in sharply and slowly climbed down the tree. When he was a few feet away from the ground, he wondered if he should not jump away from where the Gounder stood and run off.

"Get down!"

The Gounder stood beneath the tree. He looked menacing.

"Hurry up!"

He was caught, he knew that. He was glad though that Tallfellow had escaped. As he came down, his heart stopped beating wildly. He grew calm. He must think of what to do

next. The Gounder would probably beat him, find a strap of leather or rubber and lash his back. Of that he was sure. Perhaps he might even tie him to a tree and whip away. He would then send word to his Gounder. In any case, he would be beaten. Anticipating hurt, his body stiffened.

He jumped down and landed on the banks of the little canal leading away from the well. The mud on the banks crumbled and he slipped. Just as he was about to fall, the Gounder caught him by his hair and lifted him up. His grip was strong. Shortie winced. Was he going to pull his hair out? He tried to lift his head up, but could not. His eyes bulged, ready to pop out.

The Gounder's hand came down heavily on his cheek. He did not feel anything at first. Except that his head grew heavy. The Gounder dragged him into the hut and dropped him down. He picked up a lean, strong stick that lay on the ground and hit his heels with it. Once, then again. On the second beating, the stick broke. The Gounder looked around impatiently but could not lay his hands on anything handy.

"Who do you work for?"

He looked fearful, with a mane of hair that shook when he raised his voice.

Shortie did not answer. It hurt too much. His teeth chattering, he said:

"Master, I won't do it again! Let me go."

The Gounder bent down and pulled his hair.

"Master, really, I won't do it again. I did it without knowing. Promise you, I won't do it again!"

"What do you mean you didn't know?"

A kick landed on his chest.

"You didn't know, is it? Didn't know why you were climbing that tree? Or why you were plucking coconuts?

Didn't know how why you were throwing nuts down? Didn't know, indeed! What didn't you know? Tell me that!"

"Master, please!"

Unable to find something to beat him with, the Gounder kicked him till he turned over and fell face forward. Mud went into his mouth. His eyes were full of dust. So was his body. He sat up and spat the mud out and sobbed. What could he do, but sob? If he cried long enough, the Gounder might let him go. He would slap him hard, or kick him, but he would send him off, saying, "Dog! Off! Next time I see you do anything like this..."

But the Gounder did not appear to be in a hurry. He was still searching for a suitable stick.

"Dai! Tell me who you work for? Who's your father?"

"...."

"Think I'll let you off if you cry? I'm going to tie you to a tree and peel the skin off your back! You just wait! Tell me, who's your master? Answer or I'll finish you off. Just like that."

Shortie just cried. The Gounder smacked him on his mouth. His lower lip tore and started bleeding.

"Come on! Who do you work for?"

"There, in those fields beyond..."

"There? Where? In whose farm?"

His tone was frenzied now.

Shortie realised then that he did not know his Gounder's name. He knew him by the nickname given to him in the neighbourhood. But should he say it out aloud? What if he was beaten even more for referring to his Gounder like that?

"The Masaka Gounder..."

"Oh! You work for that man?"

"..."

Thoppu Kaattu Gounder stood silent. Then, in a muted but decided tone, he asked:

"Your Gounder asked you to steal coconuts from me?"

"Aiyo! No, no, of course not..."

"Dai, stop lying. I know your type. And your Gounder's type too. He must have set you up to do this..."

Thoppu Kaattu Gounder's face darkened. He curled his lips into a cruel grin.

"Did he ask you to bring him a whole cluster of nuts or only a few?"

The Gounder bent down, pulled him up by his hair and dragged him to the tree from which he had plucked the nuts. The nuts still lay on the ground. The Gounder pointed to the nut that sat squat in the soft mud of the water channel.

"Get that one."

He did.

"And the other one too."

He picked up the other nut and hugging both to his chest brought them to the Gounder.

"Let's go. We'll ask your Gounder about this."

"Master, don't! I won't do it again. Please!"

Shortie dropped both the nuts on the ground and fell at his feet. The Gounder jabbed his knee into Shortie's forehead and pulled him up before he could fall down.

"Up, and take those nuts. If you don't, I'll kill you. Now."

He picked the nuts and started walking. He realised that there was no use crying and pleading. Shortie followed the Gounder, his head bent. The coconuts that he hugged to himself felt unusually heavy. He found it hard to walk straight. The Gounder walked behind him.

As they walked into the fallow field, Tallfellow, Belly and Matchbox ran towards them. Shortie did not dare look at

them. But he stopped in his tracks. So did Thoppu Kaattu Gounder.

"Gounder Master! Please let him go. Don't do anything to him. Please!"

He could hear Belly pleading. And the others echoed her. They were all crying by now. Tallfellow even fell at the Gounder's feet and held onto his knees.

"Chi! Off! Take your hands off!"

The Gounder squirmed and tried to extricate himself from Tallfellow's grip.

"Look. All of you herd goats, right? But did any of you do what this fellow has done? You didn't. He's been asked to steal by his Gounder, that's what it is."

"It's not like that, Master. He climbed up on his own!"

Tallfellow tried to explain. But the Gounder was in no mood to listen.

"Come on! Walk!"

He pushed Shortie ahead and followed him. Slowly the sound of his friends' crying faded. Shortie walked on. The Gounder stopped and snapped a stout twig from an oonja tree and beat him on the back with it. It stung him like a scorpion bite. The knobbly twig dug into his flesh and he felt warm blood staining his back.

"Faster! Does your Gounder feed you or do you have to steal for your daily meal? Perhaps he lives by thieving too? A rascally goatherd for a rascally Gounder! What a pair!"

Thoppu Kaattu Gounder cursed Shortie's Gounder as they walked along. He punctuated his jibes with kicks that he landed at regular intervals on the boy's back. He drove him along as if he were a goat. They went through pathways not known to Shortie. He assumed they were taking a shortcut. On the way, they were hailed by a pair. A man and woman with a bundle of grass on their heads. Seeing Shortie,

they knew something was wrong. The woman, clearly a Gounder mistress, enquired:

"Who's this? And where are you taking him?"

"Him? Works for that Masaka Gounder. You know him, I'm sure. His Master sent him to steal my coconuts. The lad came all the way just to do that. Do you think he could have done that without someone putting him up to it? Think he'd have the guts?"

"Oh, oh..."

"And in the middle of the day! He climbs my tree in broad daylight. What guts! His bloody Master must have encouraged him. 'Go on, steal. What can that Thoppu Kaattu Gounder do?'"

They met several others on the way and this story was repeated to all of them. They listened politely, did not agree or disagree with the teller of the tale. A few responded though:

"These chakkili boys! They're not like they were before. Getting a bit too smart!"

"Him, smart? He wouldn't have done it on his own. His Master put him up to it."

Shortie thought that the Gounder was building a case against him just so that he would be beaten soundly when they reached his Gounder's home. He did not refute him. Whenever he tried saying something, the Gounder had stopped him with a kick.

"Cock up and walk!"

Shortie walked on, not looking anyone that they met in the eye. He wondered if the Gounder's rage would die down in the walking: perhaps at the end of this, he would set him free? For the Gounder had ceased to be angry now. He was almost normal. He stopped scolding Shortie but went on and on about his Gounder.

Soon they reached Shortie's Gounder's house. Shortie shivered. The coconuts in his hand felt unusually heavy. There was no one at home. Selvan was in a hut opposite the house, sleeping. Thoppu Kaattu Gounder shouted in the direction of the hut.

"Who is that there? You let your chakkili do the stealing and sleep in peace?"

Selvan hopped out of the hut. He stared at Shortie and at Thoppu Kaattu Gounder.

"What?"

"Where's your father?"

Something in his tone frightened Selvan.

"In the cow pen, I think..."

Thoppu Kaattu Gounder pushed Shortie ahead.

"Go!"

Shortie tried to walk fast but his legs hurt. He placed one foot after the next carefully.

"What happened? Tell me, what happened?"

Selvan ran after them, anxious, expectant.

"So you're innocent too, is it?"

But Thoppu Kaattu Gounder refused to say more. Selvan ran ahead and warned his father. When they reached the cow pen, Shortie's Gounder and his Gounder Mistress were already outside.

"If you can't afford to buy coconuts, you ought to go and beg for them, not send..."

"What the fuck are you talking about? If you're trying to blame me for something again, you'll see..."

"What'll you do? Don't I know all about you? Low-down dog that palmed a sick cow off on me! Why, this entire neighbourhood knows about you..." Thoppu Kaattu

Gounder raised his voice.

"Careful! Watch what you say! I'll... "

"You? What'll you do? Eh? What'll you do? Come on, tell me! Your goatherd drove your goats over into the fields next to mine. Tell me, talk! Tell me all about how you sent this bastard to steal my coconuts. Tell me about it. Tell me what he was doing climbing my tree..."

"You leftovers-eating dog!" Shortie's Gounder's fury turned on Shortie. "You stole those coconuts? Don't I feed you enough? Don't you eat your stomach's fill everyday? Three times a day, I feed you! Not enough, is it?"

Saying this, he brought his rough hand down on Shortie's back. The coconuts tumbled out of his hand and he was thrown against the fence that held back the cow pen. He fell flat on his face. His Gounder followed him and delivered a sharp kick on his bottom.

"Why beat him like that? You set him up and now you beat him..."

"Did he tell you that we sent him?" The Gounder Mistress spoke up.

"Why should he have to tell me anything? I know! So many lads come with their goats to the fallow field next to mine. Not one of them has dared to step into my field. This one did. What am I supposed to make of that?"

"You and your fields! As if you're the only one with land!"

The Gounder Mistress made a face at him. Thoppu Kaattu Gounder warmed to his theme.

"Bloody woman! Watch what you say! My fields are special and you know it. Which is why you sent..."

"You dog! Dare call me a 'bloody woman'? Save that for your wife. Is that what you call her when she comes to you with her legs open..."

"What kind of a man are you? Showing off before a woman!"

Shortie's Gounder turned on Thoppu Kaattu Gounder. The man decided to retreat. There was no one around and these two could do anything to him. Even kill him. But he couldn't quite give up yet. Moving away from them, but still determined to taunt, he yelled:

"Next time you want coconuts let me know. Just ask me, drop a word and I'll hand them over. A whole bunch if you want. Oh, I forgot! You won't visit me, of course. But you could always send this lad. Even this time you could have just sent word and I'd have given you an entire tree! But I know you types! Send boys out to steal while you cuddle in the cow pen. No shame! In broad daylight too."

"Dai! Motherfucker! Just you wait!"

Shortie's Gounder rushed into the hut where Selvan had been sleeping and rushed out, with a hoe in his hand. But by that time, Thoppu Kaattu Gounder was far away. He had leapt across the ridged plots and into the fields.

"I know you lot. Can't keep away from another man's food."

Thoppu Kaattu Gounder's voice could be heard floating up.

Shortie's Gounder was furious. He turned to where Shortie lay and hit him on the ankle with the hoe. Shortie screamed out in pain.

"Bastard! Because of you, I had to put up with all that! You... no, I don't want you to forget this in a hurry! Let's see if you dare steal after I'm done with you!"

He pulled Shortie up by his hair, just like Thoppu Kaattu Gounder had done, and pushed him forward. Selvan started to wail.

"Let him be! Don't do anything to him!"

Selvan held on to his father's hand, but the Gounder would have none of it. He dragged Shortie into the fields and took him to the disused field- well. He pushed him down onto the broad wooden pan-shaped water-holder that is let down into the well to haul water for the fields.

"Lie down! Stay still now!"

Shortie's body was wet with sweat and fear. His hands shook violently. His legs felt lifeless.

"Aiyo! Aiyo!"

"Stop that screaming!"

The Gounder slapped him hard on his mouth. Blood began to flow from his already torn lips. His lips were swollen and thick and felt like the fat worms that infest dung-heaps. The Gounder found a long of piece of rope, one end of which was tied to a stake pegged down by the side of the water-holder. He got ready to tie Shortie up with it. Shortie tried to sit up but was slapped down. He fell and lay flat on the broad back of the holder. Selvan and his mother tried to stop the Gounder.

"Have you gone mad? What do you think you are doing?"

The Gounder Mistress shouted in alarm. The Gounder did not look up. He was intent on binding Shortie up with the rope.

"Look, if something happens to the chakkili dog, we've had it. Why the hell are you doing this?"

"Mind your business and shut up! I know what I'm doing."

"I won't shut up! Why should you take that rascally low born son-of-a-chakkili-gounder seriously? That man's mouth is a shit-hole..."

Her words were lost on her husband.

"Motherfucker! Can't you see what he's done? He's

humiliated me! Me, a man who to this day has not put his hand out to anyone for anything! I've had plenty of others asking me. I'd rather bring up what I've eaten to offer it to someone, if they wanted it, than send them away empty-handed! And I have to listen to piss-talk because of this rascal. Shortie! Was this the hand that stole the coconuts?"

The Gounder stamped on Shortie's right hand. Shortie did not have the strength to scream. He moaned softly. He was swathed in a tangle of rope which cut into his skin. Wherever the rope touched his bruised flesh, it burnt like fire. His body was numb with pain. He lay like a sack, all trussed up. The Gounder had tied him by running the rope from his shoulders and taking it around his chest, stomach and his legs. Only his head was free.

The Gounder Mistress held the Gounder's hand and tried to plead with him. He pulled away and she fell down on the water path. Selvan rushed to his Mother's side.

"Bitch! I'll throw you into the well along with him if you cross me! Think I care? Die! Die! Maybe when you go, I'll get lucky again!"

The Mistress refused to give up.

"Don't! I'm telling you! And don't think you can do without me! You're nobody without me! Remember that!"

"Get lost! You're on his side, are you? Does this chakkili lick your cunt? Maybe that Thoppu Kaattu Gounder was right. Maybe you asked him to steal the coconuts!"

The Gounder Mistress stood up. She gathered her disheveled hair into a bun on the top of her head and prepared to leave.

"What shit you talk! Worms get your tongue! Do your worst! If you want to walk on your own head, do so. What are you waiting for? Come with me!"

She gestured to Selvan. He looked uncertain.

"Come on! Or do you want to hang around here and witness the horrors your father is up to?"

Selvan reluctantly followed his mother, though he kept looking back. The Gounder continued with his task. His breath was low and hoarse, like a water buffalo's.

"Master, leave me. I won't ever do this again. Please. Let go!"

Shortie's voice, low and soft, fell on deaf ears.

"Dai! Now's when you'll learn not to steal!"

He dragged the bundled Shortie and the water-holder to the well. He placed him on the holder and began to adjust the rope around the pulley.

"Careful now! I'm going to drop you into the well. Stay still! If you shake your head around you'll hit it against the walls and that'll be the end of you! Come on, stay still! I'm going to hang you upside-down until the evening. That'll teach you, bastard!"

Shortie lay still. The Gounder began to pull at the pulley gently. The holder tipped down into the well. Shortie's body tumbled off the holder and began to sway this way and that in midair.

He hung upside-down in the well.

"Aiyo!"

He felt his body swing, and his head move towards a jutting piece of rock. He shut his eyes. He could feel the Gounder slowly draw up the holder. He couldn't move. His limbs were tied and his head hung useless. His intestines appeared to move upwards and knock against his chest. He could not breathe.

Finally the rope stood still. He opened his eyes slowly. A frog sitting in a niche in the well's northern wall gaped at him, its eyes almost falling off its face.

"Aiyo!"

His voice went round and round the well and echoed in his ears. He looked up. All he could see was a long thin rope. He looked down. Water. At arm's length. He saw his head reflected in it. The shadow moved, causing him unease. He could not turn his head. He tried to still his mind. All the pain that he had felt earlier now lay concentrated in a point near his neck. A while after, he thought the rope had snapped and he was plumbing down into the water. He felt his body go cold, as cold as the water that lay waiting for him. The water caressed his wounds, softened the rope till it did not cut into his flesh anymore. The water soothed him. He did not want to do anything. The water was all, it took care of him.

He opened his eyes. Slaak! Something stirred in the water. A fish swimming on the water's surface swished its tail. It lifted its head up and gurgled and the water went, 'slaak'. Shortie tried to concentrate on the well's tall walls. He felt them bearing down on him. A strange sound came from a dark corner. Shortie's ears went warm with fear. He shut his eyes tight. He resolved never to open them again.

Gradually he lost all sense of his body. His mind let go of his flesh. And the body floated—a wrung-out sponge tied to a fraying piece of rope. The sponge, flat and lean, tried to cut itself off from the rope. But each time it tried, the rope tightened around it. If only the rope would let go, the sponge would be happy to float, sail away. Away into the wide, wide sky. But the sponge did not know how to get rid of the rope. It tried to press itself into a smaller and smaller knot and became momentarily free. But that freedom did not last. The rope held on to it. All around the sponge, strange sounds held the air. They taunted it, teased it into life.

Shortie reluctantly opened his eyes. Below him, a still darkness. His neck hurt, as if it was being slowly strangled

by several pairs of cruel faceless hands. He wanted those hands to go away. Then he would be happy to swing like this. Maybe forever.

He felt the rope move suddenly. He found himself travelling up. The well's holes and crevices were staring at him, dark hollow stares. He did not remember anything after that.

He did not know that the Gounder Mistress had come with a few people and hauled him out from the well. They had carried him to the goat pen and left him there. When he woke up again, after what appeared to be years and years, he saw several faces staring down at him.

Nineteen

His body feels stiff in the December cold. He tries to curl into his sack as tightly as possible, but it does not help. Damp clings to the tiny woven mesh of jute and he feels the cold as so many needle points worrying his skin. He brings his legs to his chest and curls into a warm round ball. The goats outside in the goat pen have all caught cold and each one of them has a dripping nose. He has been kept awake all night by the noise of goats clearing their throats, and swallowing their spit. His ears are stuffed, his mind numbed into quiet by one big ball of goat-sound that has lodged into his brain. A few goats sneeze. Shortie's nose tingles on hearing them.

Sounds of cows demanding fodder and calling to their keepers whirl about him and he thinks they are part of a strange dream. He is unable to sleep. Unlike the night before, and the three nights before that, when he slept so well. Though he sleeps in the cow pen in the monsoon and winter months and is used to his holey sack, the pen feels a new place, and the bed is unfamiliar, and one to which he has been reluctantly called.

How wonderful it had been, the night before, when he cuddled up to his grandmother and slept in the vast folds of her sari! It made him forget all those other nights, wiped away their memory. He tries to imagine grandmother's wrinkled hand, wants it to curl around his waist in a comforting hug. But he cannot. His memory dissolves into nothing by the cold sting of the damp.

He sleeps on and off. In one of those odd, half-wakeful moments, he sees a multitude of frogs come at him. One of them, the one with the smoothest possible skin, sticks its fat

tongue out at him. The tongue splits and lengthens until it becomes the forked tongue of a snake. The frog is still faraway, but it jumps and lands in front of him suddenly, almost staring into his eyes. It finds a nearby perch and sits down. At once all the other frogs jump and come over to where he is. As he watches them, everything else disappears. Except the frogs.

The frogs fall over each other and lie still in an unpleasant heap. There is no perch anymore, only a mess of frogs. He inspects them carefully. They are sitting on something that looks familiar. It is his head! They are on it, covering it up like a cap. Soon they are everywhere. There is nothing around him except them. His body feels sticky, their fat, smooth skin has stuck to his...

He wakes up screaming. He hears the Gounder's complaining murmur from deep inside somewhere. He is tired, and does not want to make sense of the sounds which escape the Gounder's guttural throat. He wants to sleep. His eyes are closed, but his heart and mind stumble in and out of a state of wakefulness. He wonders if the white worms that get into a goat's brains have got into his. They must have, for something twists, turns and slithers inside his skull. He wants to get them out, clear his throat and summon a huge cough that will throw out these worms, just as he has seen goats do. But they remain still and heavy, those white worms.

He is short of breath, as if they have brought him from under an empty sky and tied him up in a bundle. But this is a different sack, he tells himself. Here I can curl myself into a ball. The cold refuses to leave him. And neither does his heart agree to rest its wild wandering. He does not know it, but he cries. These days he cries as easily as he breathes. His breath gathers into a moan and heaves out his grief.

Poochi sits up and howls. A long deep howl that carries

the misery of a cold, lonely night. Shortie's Gounder gets up and goes to the dog. He tries to quiet it down.

"What are you howling for? Anything wrong?"

The dog continues to moan, but it is muted, its sorrow stuck in its throat. But in the quiet of the night, it sounds ominous. The Gounder kicks at the dog. It yelps in pain and retreats against the side of the pen. A shiver runs through Shortie's body. He shrinks further into himself. He feels pain in his back, and it spreads down and then up his legs. He does not want to let on that he is awake. Returning to his cot, the Gounder mutters to himself.

"What kind of sleep is that? So stuffed to the arse against the cold that you can't hear a dog howl?"

Shortie feels the Gounder's foot on his back, but he pretends to be fast asleep. He cannot tell how late it is. Or how early. The insects of the night have stopped chirping. The village cockerels are quiet. It is too cold for them to crow out the hour of dawn. There is only the sound of the Gounder's bed creaking, as he turns over. But clearly he too cannot sleep. The dog's howl has woken him. He sits up and belches loudly.

Shortie hears his every move. The sound of him getting up. Shuffling into his slippers. The rasping sound of his feet as he walks to the fence and lifts the bamboo poles. The soft rustle of the poles when they are slipped back into place.

He gets up and throws off his sack. It is dark inside the cow pen. He has nothing on, except his loincloth. He runs to the cot, crossing his hands over his chest. He can lie on the cot for a while, until the Gounder gets back. But he must try and keep awake. He can steal away when he hears him return. But no fear there, the Gounder is not likely to return before dawn. He lies down on the cot and pulls the warm sheet that lies on it over him. He pulls it all the way to his chest. It feels snug and warm.

His grandmother had given him a sheet like this, for all those three nights that he stayed with her. She had bought it a long time ago, when her body was still strong and agile and she could work steadily. She had gone to help with the harvest in the fields that lay to the far west and with the harvest money bought this blanket. She used it only in the damp months. It was put away in a basket at other times. When Shortie visited her, she wrapped him in it to keep him warm. He thinks of her gnarled hands stroking his back gently. His mind turns that memory back and forth.

The day after he had been swung upside-down in the well, his parents were sent for. Sobbing, he ran to his mother and buried his head on her shoulders. She held him close, and wept quietly.

"Such a small fellow and they do this to him! What can I do, my love, what can I do?"

She ran her fingers over his hair, rubbing his head gently. He had wanted to go back with her that very moment. But the Gounder refused to let him. His father begged, pleaded, but the Gounder was adamant. He would not be sent with his parents.

"I don't see why he should go. And why do you two make it seem as if the heavens have fallen? If your boy had behaved properly, I wouldn't have touched him..."

"Maybe, maybe. But even if he was wrong, surely there is a limit Master, a limit to how much you can punish a small boy. We are yours, but to do this... would you do this to your own son?"

Shortie's father was slightly drunk, but he spoke clearly. It was dusk. The Gounder was in the goat pen, and sitting on his cot. The goats were bunched underneath and staring at them. At first, the Gounder spoke almost normally. As he recalled the events of the day before, his voice became tinged with a growing rage.

"If my son had done wrong, I'd have punished him. Do you think that because he's my son, he gets special treatment? If he had stolen something I'd have broken his thieving hands and his wandering legs. You know my father don't you? Know what he did to me once? Well, he used to take me to the weekly market. And I'd tag along happily. Once we were buying green limes. Without thinking, I slipped one into my bag. My father didn't notice it then. When we came home, I handed him my stolen lime saying 'Father, see I got a lime free, when the shopkeeper was not looking'. You should have seen my father then. He was furious. 'I'm ashamed to call you my son. No son of mine would have dared take what does not belong to him.'

But that's not all. He trussed me up and hung me upside -down from the ceiling. And that's not all either. He stood there and burnt dry chilli dust on coals beneath my head. My mother screamed, begged but he pushed her out and locked the door. The chilli crackled and the smoke spread into my eyes and nostrils, I felt them burn. I yelled and my eyes watered... and all the time I was upside-down! My father stood there, feeding the coals with chilli dust and each time I sneezed, he said, 'Will you do it again? Take what is not yours?'

Since then, I've not laid my hands on anything that's not mine. Not even on a peanut fallen on the wayside. And you ask me if I'd do the same to my son? Of course, I would! Boys have to be shown the right way when they do something wrong. And you've got to let them know it doesn't pay. If you don't set them right now... do you think Shortie will ever look at something that is not his now? Now you tell me what I've done wrong? You come here, thinking I've done things to your son when all I did was set him right for life..."

What could Shortie's parents say to this? His father lamely affirmed what the Gounder said.

"You know best Master. I've left him here in your care. I trust you... do what is best. You're everything to him..."

"Best? Of course I'll do my best by him. You don't worry. I'll take care of him."

Shortie's parents felt that was the best that they could hope for. They would have liked to take Shortie with them, but that was not to be.

Shortie did not want them to go. Especially his mother. He held onto her sari ends for a long time. His mother had to prise his fingers away from her sari. He had hoped she would somehow convince the Gounder to send him home. His hopes crushed, he stood watching his mother walk away into the dark. No, the dark has not eaten her up, she is inside it, he told himself.

A few days later, something unexpected happened. His father came to visit. It was the twilight hour and Shortie was coaxing the goats into the pen for the night. The Gounder was busy cleaning sheaves of corn. Why had his father come at that hour of the day? He motioned him inside the pen, as he let the goats in. Perhaps his father needed money, ten, twenty rupees. He never understood these transactions between his father and the Gounder, could never keep track of what they discussed. Sometimes it seemed to him that his father had taken such a huge advance from the Gounder that he, Shortie, would have to work for the next five or six years in the Gounder household. Each time his father came by himself, his heart sank. He knew the drama that would unfold. His father would plead, the Gounder refuse.

Shortie's father saluted the Gounder.

"Greetings, Master."

Startled, the Gounder turned around.

"You? At this time?"

Shortie had got the goats in and was busy securing the bamboo poles, but his ears were alert to what was going on with the Gounder and his father.

"Nothing, Master. Thought I'd take Shortie home..."

The Gounder's rough voice cut his plea short.

"What for?"

Shortie was afraid that he would say "no" whatever the reason for his father wanting him to go home. He decided that it was best not to expect anything.

"I'll bring him back first thing tomorrow, Master."

"Taking him away for the night? What's happening that he has to be home for the night?"

The Gounder's tone was still gruff but clearly he was amused by this request.

"Happening? Nothing, Master. Just that the village is having a feast. We each get a portion of the meat... just thought I'd take the boy home and feed him a good meal..."

"Ho, ho! Meat, is it? Not bad, not bad at all for you chakkilis. What is it you're cooking? Goat or bird?"

"Us cook a goat or a bird? Surely you're joking Master! Can't afford all that. Just a dead cow some men brought back from Keezhiripatti. It took ill suddenly and died..."

"Whose is it?"

"Muthu Gounder's they say..."

"Ate something poisonous?"

"No, they say it was fine until the moment it took ill. It was standing one minute, and the next minute, its legs started shaking... then it called out 'Maa' and dropped dead. Just like that."

"God help that Gounder! He must be a sad man! But you, its feast time for you..."

"It's not like that."

"Alright, take him. But make sure he comes back at the light of dawn. No excuses. I don't want to hear any 'He went there, he had to go here...' alright?"

Shortie was thrilled. But he did not let on that he had heard their conversation. He continued with his routine tasks. He heard them talk about money, about what he should be paid for the coming year. The Gounder sounded firm.

"Let's talk about it later. End of this month, or maybe a bit later even..."

The Gounder called out to Shortie.

"Shortie! Seems you're wanted at home. Go, but get back early, before the sun comes up. Don't just stand around staring and wasting time..."

"Yes, Master."

"Hmm..."

Shortie walked behind his father demurely. But once they were out of sight of the cow pen, he started to run, making a strange sound—his father could not tell whether it was a cry of pain or a joyful tune.

"Dai, dai, where are you going?"

Shortie did not hear his father calling. He had disappeared into the dark. He wanted to reach home before his father did. He ran along the fields and reached the main road. It was not fully dark yet. Everything looked hazy as if he was looking at the world through a fine thin veil. He could see trees and rocks outlined in grey. He ran, training his eyes to look through the gloaming hour. The tamarind trees that lined the sides of the main road echoed with the babel of crows and other birds returning to their nests. The crows were of course the loudest and kept up a steady chatter.

He crossed the road and sped along field ridges and mud banks. Now and then, he had to trot along a single, narrow path. He liked that, jogging down a rutted mud road. He

decided that he must not stop until he reached home. He hurried on, pursued by the dark that was now gathering all around him. He wanted to race the dark before it got the better of him.

When he reached the chakkili quarter, he stopped at the temple that stood at its entrance. By then, dusk had fallen. Soft velvety darkness that made it difficult for him to see who was around the temple. He was short of breath and very sweaty. But he was thrilled, exhilarated at having run all those four, five miles to his home without stopping even for a moment. His father must have barely reached the main road, and here he was, home already.

He peered into the inside of the temple, dedicated to Mariamma, goddess of rain and the pox. A small lamp burnt inside. It glowed dully. He stood by the tattered canopy of woven thatch and bamboo that had been pitched outside the temple. Some people seemed to be lying underneath it. Nearby a group of children were playing and shouting. They were very young, certainly not his age. He could not possibly play with them. He looked at them closely. No, neither his younger brother nor sister was part of that rowdy gang. He turned away and walked into the chakkili quarter.

Pinpoints of light dotted the dark, showing the presence of houses. Sounds of children crying or talking and women arguing filled the night air. But he did not smell meat cooking. He sniffed his way about as he walked on, but still nothing. Had his father lied to him? But why would he? What was there to lie about? And in any case why would he want to lure him home with the promise of rice and meat? Besides, had he not told the Gounder all about the dead cow, who it belonged to? No, his father would not have lied to the Gounder.

He stopped, brought up short by a group of women talking gaily. One of them was holding up a lantern to two

others who were grinding something in a large mortar. A few others stood around, with vessels and pails in their hands. He could not see their faces in the dark. But he knew what they were doing. They were at the common village mortar to grind spices for the kozhambu that would go with the beef that was being cooked.

The mortar was huge, so wide that even if four men are to hold hands and stand around it, they would not be able to encircle it. It had a long pestle and you could pound at things inside it, standing up. The mortar was rarely used—only on occasions such as this one, when a cow was butchered for a village feast, or sometimes when the village decided to ground rice in it to cook a communal puttu. On such days a crowd would gather around the mortar. At other times, the mortar was a plaything for jumping and climbing children. When the village observed its annual ritual fasting, young men sat about the mortar, chatting to keep the pangs of hunger away.

He wondered if his mother was part of the group that stood there. He could not tell.

"Is my mother there?"

His loud tone cut through the women's chatter and they fell silent. Then, one of them, who had looked at him searchingly shouted:

"It's our Shortie!"

The others giggled. Even the women who were wielding the pestle stopped their work and laughed.

Shortie felt shy. He wanted to run away from that place at once. His mother was not there. He started to run. The sound of their gay voices followed him as he ran home. Maybe he should have stayed and talked to them a bit. But he could not, he had felt shy and hesitant. Feelings he had not known before. He looked into his hut. His mother was

trying to kindle her fire, blowing at it. Suddenly the flames shot up and started to burn steadily. His mother looked small and shrunk besides the glow of the fire.

"Mother!"

He walked in and sat by her side, laying his hand on her shoulder. She sat back and took his hands in hers.

"Where's your father?"

"Where're my little sister and brother?"

"Did the Gounder beat you again?"

"No, no."

It seemed to her that something had changed in him after being swung upside-down in the well. His face appeared clouded, a permanent sadness had settled on it. His mother kept looking at him for a long time and then turned to the fire. There was a vessel of kozhambu boiling away. Obviously his mother had collected her share of spices earlier on. The sauce was beginning to froth and would soon boil over. Thinking he would be hungry, she said.

"Just a bit. Let it cook a bit longer."

"We're having rice?"

"No. Millet."

Her tone was subdued, a little sad. He had come home, expecting to eat rice. And now this. He tried to hide his disappointment. He got up and stretched out in a corner of the hut. He sat thus for a while, staring at the woven roof. His mother turned to look at him from time to time. He did not notice her looking. His eyes were open but he was staring vacantly. He looked as if he had lost everything. Earlier his face would brim with excitement, elation and mischief. All that had gone. He looked grown-up. He also seemed to have become quieter. More thoughtful.

She grew worried.

His young brother and sister came running in. His sister stopped at the entrance, shy and unsure. Was that indeed her elder brother? She was barely four years old. His brother bounced over to him and climbed on to his lap. He called his sister to him, and kissed and cuddled her. Surely he was no stranger! His mother was glad. At last he seemed his old self, as he played with his brother and sister, laughed at their antics.

Shortie's father came in a while later. He did not appear to be steady on his feet. He handed his mother a small little closed vessel with their portion of the beef and lay down in one corner of the hut. Shortie watched him, as he lay still. They woke his father up when the beef kozhambu was ready.

The kozhambu tasted wonderful and went down well with the steamed millet. It must have been a young cow. Its flesh was tender, soft and springy as cotton. Shortie ate with relish. His mother heaped an extra ladle of kozhambu on his plate. His father who had been staring at his son all along grumbled.

"That's right. Give him some more. Let him eat and then go and make my life difficult. Make me pay for his bad behaviour..."

"What payment? What's happened now? Can't you let him eat in peace?"

His mother tried to stop her husband from talking further. He ignored her and continued in a tired, disgusted voice.

"First, he loses a goat kid. I have to pay a hundred rupees for that. Isn't that payment enough? I send him to work and he behaves badly. Fucker! I should break your legs and keep you tied to this house. You'll be fed nothing but kanji."

Seeing his father grind his teeth in rage, Shortie felt his appetite lessen. He retorted in voice as grim as his father's:

"And how is that hundred rupees going to be paid? From

my salary! You're not going to pay that back yourself!"

"Rascal... if you open your mouth..."

His father raised his hand and came over to where Shortie sat. The two younger ones sprang back in fear. Shortie sat still. He looked calm, his eyes said, 'what can you do to me, what can your beatings do to me?' He wanted to say that his body was ready for anything. Any kind of hurt. The kozhambu had dried and caked on his fingers.

"You brought him home for this? To quarrel with him?"

His mother put her hand out and pushed her husband away from her son. He fell flat on his back and lay there, his legs spread apart. He tried to but could not get up. He had barely eaten. His plate was only a quarter empty. Shortie did not want to raise him from the floor and make him sit at his plate. His father continued to abuse him, but in a low undertone.

"Ignore him! You eat..."

His mother called his attention back to the food. But he had lost interest. And the food did not taste nearly as good. Yet he ate his fill. He was tired, from work, from running. Exhausted, he dropped off to sleep besides his brother and sister.

His mother woke him up at an early hour, before the dark had fled the sky. He looked around him. His father lay sprawled in a corner, wedged against the wall of the hut. He felt sorry for him. He had not eaten his night meal. His mother would have let him be, not woken him up. He got ready to go, though sleep still stuck to his eyes. He pulled his loincloth tight, tied his towel around his head. His mother handed him a frayed sari, and asked him to cover himself till the sun came up.

Reluctantly, he took his leave. His eyes lingered on his brother and sister sleeping soundly. He wished he could

stop time there, just stand there looking at them. If he could only stay for a day, he would have been able to play with them. His brother was still so young. But like him he too would be sent away to a gounder household, maybe not this year, but certainly in the following year, or the year after that. His sister was still little. But she will miss her little brother when he went. He decided that the next time he was allowed to go home, he would stay a few days. He must bring the children something from the fields. Thinking of the things that he could bring with him, he opened the door of the hut and stepped out.

"Sweetie, careful now. Stick to your work. Don't get into trouble."

His mother sounded worried. He shook his head and walked into the street. The air was thick and damp with dew. He felt it weigh on his chest. He tied his towel tightly around his head, and made sure that his ears were covered. He wrapped his mother's sari around his shoulders. A little warm, he walked on. When the wind blew against his face, he shivered. Cold, very cold.

The chakkili quarter was still quiet. No one was up yet. He stood for a few minutes outside the temple and prayed.

"Get me home for the festival at least, Mother. Bless me. Make sure I stay for at least four days then."

He walked through the adjoining fields and reached the main road. Just then he noticed another path leading away from the main road, but in a different direction. He stopped. This other path lead to several large fields and finally to a rocky outcrop, skirted by a canal of winding water. Local legend had it that once this canal was full of crocodiles and it was known as Crocodile Canal even now. Beyond the outcrop the path descended to a small village—Elampullipalayam, his grandmother's village. His mother's mother. She lived by herself in a tiny hut. He wondered if he

should not go and see her.

Why should he get back to the Gounder household in a hurry? Surely they would be able to manage without him? The Gounder or Selvan may have to take the goats out. Or they will let them feed on the peanut haystack and keep them indoors for the day. He could return tomorrow. The Gounder would of course scold him, maybe even hit him. How does that matter? His body was long dead. He could take many more beatings.

He cut his way through the darkness and saw it scatter into a muddle of grey and light. The outcrop was hard to climb, slippery. He knew that there were footholds and crevices all along. If only he could find them now. He had played here when he was younger. It was a wonderful place to play hide-and-seek—so many places to hide away. Thinking of the time he had spent with his grandmother, when small, he climbed down the slope of the outcrop.

It was well past dawn when he reached her village. He saw girls with water-pots walking out. They stared at him, some frowned. His grandmother was still asleep, and the door to her hut was shut. He lifted the woven latch and stepped in. Light poured inside and spread happily to every corner. His grandmother sat up, holding her hands to her eyes.

"Ohhh..."

He sat by her side. She did not appear to have recognised him.

"Who? Who's that?"

She ran her hands along his face and peered into his eyes. Slowly, her eyes got used to the light. Her face broke into a happy smile.

"It's you! Couldn't tell at first. I can't see very well these days. If you'd spoken, I would have known..."

He had last seen his grandmother six months ago. Since

then, she appeared to have aged, and looked more frail than he remembered her. As if she had taken to her bed. But seeing him, she was fired into doing things. She got up and started to make the fire. She did not seem to mind the damp and cold, so excited she was on seeing her grandson. He watched her affectionately. Her large nose-ring was black and tarnished yet defined her nose. On her thin wrinkled wrist, she wore worn-out copper bangles. She looked around for her water-pot.

"You stay here. Let me go fetch water."

He grabbed the pot from her. She looked at him curiously. He had grown taller, was almost as tall as a grown man. She had to look up to catch his eyes. A fuzzy line of hair had appeared above his lips.

"God keep you! May he ward the evil eye off! You look so fine... no wonder that Gounder hung you upside-down! May he rot! May worms eat his hands! May his house tumble down and weeds grow all over it..."

He laughed and walked out with the pot.

"How he was, and how he is now. Such a chatterbox and now so quiet and serious. Like a grown man!" His grandmother spoke to herself and then called out loudly to his disappearing back.

"Go carefully. Watch out for those women by the well. Every one of them is a slut Don't even talk to them. They'll eat you alive."

Shortie smiled. He fetched four pots of water. He sat down and chatted with his grandmother while she busied about, cooking. Then strolled out and played desultorily with the boys on the streets. Came home, ate and went out again. He stretched under the neem tree that stood by the village temple and tried to sleep.

He thought of his goats. There were more than twenty of

them now. Three were first-time pregnant and would litter anytime. Maybe even now. He could not do anything about that, in any case. He will have to deal with it, when he got back. He called to mind his Gounder's face. And also the Gounder Mistress—how they abuse him, call him names. And then, Selvan. Selvan who had promised to find him money to pay for the stolen goat, but who had done nothing. But Shortie was not angry. After all, Selvan had no money of his own. If only that goat had not been stolen, this year around too they would have been allowed to take the goats out to the fields for the night. But the Gounder may not agree to that anymore. "Enough, enough. I've had enough, letting you two guard my pen."

As he drifted into sleep, he thought of Belly, Tallfellow, Stumpleg and little Matchbox. Belly would miss him of course, but would somehow manage. That Matchbox—she tagged along behind him often, saying, "Brother, brother". And he had not seen Stumpleg for a while. His Gounder wanted him to work on the fields, drive him to town more often. He had also found another man for his goats. In a way, thought Shortie, it will be nicer without him.

He slept almost until evening. He got up, went to the hut and spent some time with his grandmother. He promised to return and set off for the fields. He climbed the outcrop again and sat at the very top. There fields all around him were ready for the harvest. In some of them the crop had been harvested and only the stalks were left standing. His Gounder's fields too were ready and waiting for the sickle and the scythe.

He sat there for a long time. He half-expected his father or the Gounder to come looking for him. But thankfully no one did. It was almost dusk when he heard his grandmother calling into the twilight. He clambered down.

She had cooked him a meal of steamed millet and a

kozhambu made of beans. Fresh kozhambu, thick and tasty. He smothered his millet in it. He stretched out beside his grandmother and slept almost immediately, sprawled on her sari folds.

The next morning, his grandmother woke him up. It was barely light.

"I have to go to Athi Gounder's fields. For harvesting. They wanted me to go yesterday. I didn't go because you came..."

He replied without thinking, "I'll come too."

His grandmother looked doubtful but agreed. What if his Gounder came here looking for him? They were joined by a group of girls who giggled when they saw Shortie. They smiled at each other and at his grandmother.

"What Grandma, found yourself a new husband?"

His grandmother was not fazed.

"Need a bridegroom, any of you? Come on, come and look whoever wants to..."

Shortie felt painfully shy. He remembered seeing some of these girls during his previous visits. But he was tongue-tied now and could not speak. He answered those who spoke to him, but barely. There were some older girls there as well, like Stonedeaf, girls in long skirts and half-saris. He looked at them from time to time, wondering if he had known any of them earlier. But he could not make out. He could not recall any names from before. Seeing him stare, one of the girls smiled at him. A friendly, warm smile. Her sparkling eyes and bright face reminded him of the glowing yellow of the aavaaram bush. He smiled back.

They started to harvest the corn. The Gounder Mistress to whose family the land belonged also joined them. She kept calling the girls to order. Shortie worked quietly. They worked until evening. The sun was beginning to go down,

but the Mistress called out that they still had a lot to do. The girls muttered but continued to work. Shortie did not mind. Harvesting of this kind was not hard and he even enjoyed doing it. They worked until the sun was almost down and the sky an even grey. When they were done, Shortie's grandmother marched up to the Gounder Mistress.

"My grandson, Mistress. He'll be off tomorrow. Pay him for the day's work. The lad will be thankful to have something to spend on his way back..."

The Mistress pulled out a bag tied to her waist and handed him two rupees. His grandmother shook her head.

"A little more, surely Mistress? After all he's a man... surely he deserves more?"

"A man? That boy? Call him a man? That's why I tell you all not to bring half-grown lads like this..."

Reluctantly, she handed out another twenty-five paise. Shortie's grandmother looked grateful and triumphant as she took it.

That night, when he was about to sleep, his father arrived. A lot of scolding and shouting ensued. Neither his mother nor father knew that he had not returned to the Gounder. The first day, the Gounder himself did not bother. He consoled himself with the thought, "These chakkili boys! They're all like that!" He was sure Shortie would return the second day. When he did not, he came to the chakkili quarter and demanded his whereabouts. It was only then that his parents knew he had not returned.

"At your age, you can't run away from work! You must go back, Shortie!"

His father cajoled, coaxed, screamed. None of it had any effect on him. He longed to shout: you took the money from the Gounder, didn't you? Why don't you go and graze goats? But he did not say it and held his calm. His grandmother

sent his father away with the promise that she would make sure Shortie got back to work the following day.

At dawn, she shook him awake and handed him a bowl of kanji, left to ferment from the night before.

"Sweetie, get back!"

He nodded and started to walk up the outcrop. When he reached its flat top, the sun was fully out. He sat down, happy for the rock's warmth. A warmth that slowly slid into his skin. He must have sat there for a while, because when he again became aware of his surroundings, he felt the sun sting his eyes and body. He got up and looked around. There it was, that deep crevice he knew. He went and lay down in its hollow—it felt cool and dry like a cave. The sun did not get in here. He slept.

When he woke up, he felt very tired and lazy. His insides tugged at him, he was hungry. What was he to do? His Gounder must have surely visited his grandmother by now. He decided that he could not go back to her. He got up and came out of the cave. It was well past twilight and the air was heavy with damp. He lay down on the barren outcrop and looked at the skies. The stars shimmered through a haze.

He was afraid to lie out on the rock for the night. But if he managed to spend the night here, he could get back to work in the morning. He must get back, otherwise, things could get very bad. His Gounder must be furious, angry with his mother and father already. He would have threatened them. What if, like Stonedeaf's Gounder, he demanded that his brother be sent to work in his place?

"One more day... one more day is all I'll wait. If your son doesn't turn up, make sure you have his younger brother ready! If not, put out the money that you owe me!"

This thought sobered him. He did not want his younger brother to get into this. Not just yet. He should get back. In

any case, there would be scoldings, beatings...

He lay on the rock for a long time and was startled into sitting up by the sound of a owl hooting. It sounded eerie, and made the night seem even more lonely. His heart beat faster. He decided to return to his cave. But he was not sure if that would help. He must leave this place. Now. He ran down the slope of the outcrop, fear thudding his heart. He ran, as if he was being hunted.

He did not want to go back to his grandmother's. He ran the other way, back to the chakkili quarter where his parents lived. He dropped down under the temple canopy. There were a number of layabouts there. He lay down beside them and shut his eyes. He was hungry and tossed this way and that and, at some unknown hour of the night, he passed into sleep.

He woke up, hearing a sharp rebuke. The Gounder. On one side, on the other side, his father. They seemed wary, afraid, perhaps, he would run away. He stood up and followed the Gounder and his father. He walked along with them, his eyes to the ground. The two lectured him all along the way, but the words floated away. His ears appeared to have shut themselves off from the world. Just as how his body had drawn itself into a tight knot, waiting to be kicked at any time.

Nothing happened though. His Gounder Mistress handed him a bowl of kanji.

"Drink this and then take the goats out."

He did not look up at any of them.

Twenty

The Gounder has already told him about the goats. He must make sure that they eat their fill.

"Take them to where the pasture is rich. I want to see their stomachs swollen."

This is not something new. Each year, during the harvest festival, the Gounder pampers his goats. He wants them to feed their fill—till their stomachs bloat, as if they are pregnant. He does not even mind if they are taken to a field ripe for harvest. On that day alone, the goats are allowed to chew and feed off the grain while their keepers mind them from either end of a demarcated piece of land.

The cows and oxen are another matter. The Gounder takes care of them himself. He feeds them by the hour and fixes cow feed and water for them specially. He also makes sure that they are not taken to the plough that day or to the well. Whatever happens, that one day the cows have to be left alone.

"Let them be just for a day. Poor things! How they work the rest of the time!"

Shortie has brought out his goats very early when the sky is still flecked with dusk. The fields are covered with mist and everything looks ghostly, as if seen through a woven screen. Shortie has to strain his eyes to see, he cannot make out anything beyond the plot of land in front of him. He stands with the goats, he cannot let them be by themselves. As they scatter about him, sniffing along the wet grass, they grimace. They do not like to chew on pasture wet with dew. They amble along, and Shortie with them. He decides to drive them to the lakebed. There, he will find them unripe berries and fruits from the karuvelam tree. The goats love

these fruits and could chew on these till the sun is up and dries the dew. He can drive them back to their pasture then.

He feels the damp enter his head through his thin turban. He stands against a roughened palm but finds its trunk is wet too. His body shivers. He takes his towel off his head and covers himself with it.

What has happened to him? He has never been afraid of the cold, never wanted to cover himself like this. Why does his body feel so odd and always tired? Even when his heart is happy, his body does not seem to notice. It stays slumped and exhausted. Though he works as before, things happen on their own, as if his body has nothing to do with them. As if it is unattached to anything. It floats, relieved to hang in midair.

He recalls his father's words. Soon he will be ready, rather his body must be got ready for other tasks—driving the plough, digging the earth, preparing mud ridges... only then can his father hope to ask for a raise in his salary. If the Gounder agrees to raise his salary by a hundred rupees, they can pay him off for the stolen goat. But Shortie does not think the Gounder will give in so easily.

"More? Think I can afford more? I feed your son thrice a day, buy him clothes for the year and still you want more? Nothing doing. I need him for the goats. Got to keep them well-fed and sell a few now and then. Can't hope to earn anything if I can't sell goats..."

Last year, the Gounder had agreed to pay his father four hundred rupees for Shortie's year-long work. Knowing his father, he must have asked for more and agreed to subtract that amount from what would be paid for him the following year. God alone knows how much he has actually borrowed from the Gounder. Whatever the amount, even a hundred rupees is bound to gather interest. The hundred rupees borrowed will grow to become two hundred rupees. Which

means that of the next year's salary, only two hundred rupees would be left. If there is to be a raise in the coming year, it cannot be much. The Gounder would probably agree to a fifty rupee raise. His father will be paid two hundred and fifty rupees, if at all.

And then there are the occasional loans that his father takes from the Gounder. At least next year, he must persuade him not to ask for money every now and then. But will his father listen? His father has always reasons ready. "I need this for repairing my roof, for the village festival tax, to buy clothes for you all during the Mariamma temple festival..." Next year if his father insists on taking loans in the middle of the year, he must learn to be firm, tell him that he, and not Shortie, will have to work these loans off. He must discuss this with his mother.

Shortie is lost in these calculations and does not notice his towel slipping off his back and shoulders. He pulls it back up and realises that he has knotted one of its ends securely. He opens the knot and pulls out a fistful of coins—the money he earned when he visited his grandmother. He had taken it all out a day or two ago, when a man came along selling boiled sweets and eggs. He bought some sweets, but kept the rest of the money safely tied into his towel ends.

He begins to count the coins. He loves their weight and turns them over in his hands. If he can only go and stay with his grandmother, he might earn a lot, fill his towel with coins. Surely she will take him along, whenever she goes to work. And perhaps that girl will be there too, the girl who came with them to harvest the corn, the one who smiled into his eyes. He has not forgotten that smile, and recalls it from time to time. He should have found out her name at least. His grandmother probably knows her. The next time there is a festival in that village, he must make sure he goes there.

He ties up the coins again and feels them weigh against

his back. He likes the feel of them pressing on his head, dangling on his back. The coins remind him of that smiling girl. He is convinced that only he has seen her smile. Why, she smiled at him, for him. Of that he is sure. He holds that smile as a secret in his heart. He has not told anyone about her. Not even Belly, to whom he showed the coins.

At night, before he sleeps, he makes sure his coins are still there. He has only to shut his eyes and her face appears in the dark. As if she is tucked away in his eyelids and waits for him to fall asleep. He loves to see her like that. Seeing her fills him with a joy he has never known before. Happy with her presence, he drifts to sleep sometime, but is never sure when. In the morning, when it is time to be up, he does not want to open his eyes. If he does he is irritated, for all he can see are the goats and cows. He avoids getting up and fidgets on his sack for a while, until he realises that he cannot afford to keep his eyes shut any longer.

The sun is out and its young rays tickle his skin. Glad for the warmth, he peels off the towel from his back and stands in the middle of the fields, showing his body to the sun. The mist has retreated to the edge of the fields, it is a hazy line, defining the horizon. He soaks in the sun and feels himself come to life. The fields glow in the morning light. The goats are still in the lakebed and won't want to climb up for a while. They wait for the sun to suck in the dew and leave the grass dry for them to munch.

Shortie walks up to the Big Rock. It is wet. He finds a place the sun is sure to warm, and spreads his towel on it. He lies down, not minding the damp seeping through his towel, for the sun is now on him. His face and body drink in the warmth hungrily. The sky is a pale blue and empty. He stares at it for a long time and then goes to sleep.

He comes to life again, carried up from the deeps of sleep by the sound of laughter. He cranes his head to find Belly

standing behind him. Behind her are Tallfellow and Matchbox. Seeing him awake and startled, they laugh even more. His hands involuntarily stray to his loincloth. He is relieved to find that it is in place. He feels embarrassed, though. He sits, without turning back to look at them. The goats are up now and all around. The sun is fairly high. God knows how long he has been lying like this, soaking up the sun. He cannot think further, he has no vitality left in him, nothing with which to look the world in the eye.

"Shortie! What's this? Didn't you sleep at night? Drank something that didn't agree with you?"

Shortie does not reply. Tallfellow comes up to him and hugs his shoulders. He feels a tremor inside him and flushes with warmth.

"Shy Shortie? What about?"

Tallfellow draws him to his chest and lifts his chin up.

"Let go, Tally!"

Shortie is brusque. He shakes him off and looks into the sky. He stretches his arms out and pushes his shoulders back. He likes the feel of Tally's affectionate hug, he wants to hear those words of concern again, but yet his heart resists holding the moment.

"What Brother, sleeping like this..."

A faint smile lights up his face and he looks fondly at Matchbox. Belly repeats the question but in a more taunting tone. But she is clearly troubled and longs for him to be his usual self. Tallfellow decides that he must break the odd tenor of their conversation.

"So, either you've finally attained puberty or they feed you a lot now. No wonder you sleep like this!"

Shortie grins. The tension in the air is broken for the moment. They walk down to where the goats are. No one wants to play or run around. They are worried about the

goats. If they linger for so long on the dry grass that grows in straggly clumps everywhere on the fields, when will their stomachs fill up? Each of them separates their goats from the common herd and take them to thick wedges of green pasture, and then back to the lakebed. They gather berries, strip leaves off the trees and bring them in handfuls to the goats. They pluck the leaves off the vaadanarayana tree, the blooming poovarasu branches. The goats chomp hungrily.

After a while the lakebed is in utter disarray. There are berries everywhere, fallen leaves, cut creepers. The air is replete with goatherding sounds: "Ho! Ho!" "Re! Re!". This tumult of the green troubles snakes and insects, rabbits and garden lizards. Disconcerted, they plunge into the very depths of the earth. They know of holes and little caves, crevices and pathways where no human or goat feet have trodden. As they hiss and scuttle to their hideouts, their sounds of caution mingle with the goat cries.

The goats are all over the lakebed, down to its farthest end. Their herders follow them, making sure that the goats eat on. They keep watch to make sure they don't wander. By midday, the goats look well-fed. Their stomachs looks round and almost swollen, except for the bit of space between their back and legs. Their bodies appear to sag just there. One more round of grazing and they should be alright.

Watching the goats eat, Shortie feels hungry himself. He has forgotten to drink his morning's kanji. It has slipped his mind somehow. Well, he'll have to drink it all up in one go, when they sit for their afternoon meal. He calls his goats together and drives them up and out of the lakebed. He gestures to the others. They follow him and soon all the goats are in the fields. Shortie's goats run straight to the field-well. There is a large dry gourd there, half-filled with water. He looks around and sees a large toddy bowl. He picks it up and slowly gets down to the well.

The steps to the well are slippery and caked with soft, fine mud. The thick mud tickles his feet. He plants his feet in firmly and gets down. The water is still, a mixture of white and green. He dips his bowl in and the water breaks into ripples. He fills the bowl with water, rinses it, fills it again, washes it, shakes it this way and that. The long tangled shadows of the overhanging neem and minnal trees are reflected in the calm water. He looks into the well. Its countless holes and niches are still there, staring at him, as always. He averts his eyes, bends down, fills his bowl with water and comes up. He fills the gourd and returns. He asks Belly to go the second time.

Belly and Matchbox join him and fill the gourd. The goats come to it and slake their thirst. Full and replete, their thirst assuaged, they retire to the shade and settle down.

The children sit down to their meal. Since he has his morning portion left over as well, Shortie is forced to eat a lot. As the kanji fills him up, he feels drowsy. He settles down under a palm tree and closes his eyes. He is asleep in a second, a deep undisturbed sleep.

"Dai, Shortie!"

He feels a foot butt his hip. He tries to open his eyes but finds that his eyelids are stuck to each other. He has to rub them before he can even see properly. Waves of light dance in front of his eyes and he sees Selvan's face caught in a whirling wave. Surprised and shocked, he sits up.

"What's this, Shortie? Sleeping during the day... three days in your grandmother's house and you've got used to sleeping all the time? "

"Why are you here, Master?"

"To find out what the fuck you're doing. Today is the day of the cattle and goat festival and here you are sleeping ,instead of..."

Shortie struggles to free himself from the coils of sleep. He does not know why, but these days, he sleeps a lot, especially during the day. All he has to do is close his eyes and he is gone. How and why he sleeps like this, he does not know. Perhaps it is because he slept an entire day in the cave, on the outcrop. Ever since then it seems to have stuck to him, this habit of sleeping in broad daylight. And now Selvan has seen him doze, he'll never hear the last of it.

Selvan is hot and sweaty from walking in the sun. His face shines in the heat. There is a tightness about his mouth. He must have got scolded at home. Or even beaten.

"What're you staring at? Never seen me before?"

Selvan is scornful and his face is rigid. Hoping to lighten his mood, Shortie answers:

"Are you a girl, that I should stare at you?"

"So, you'll only stare at girls, eh?"

Shortie realises that Selvan is in a strange mood. He is clearly spoiling for a fight. He does not think that Selvan can be brought around to be amiable all that easily. It is best for me to keep quiet, thinks Shortie, not speak unnecessarily. He smiles, a lopsided smile and remains silent.

"Do you remember that today is the cattle festival?"

"Why do you ask me, Master?"

"Because there's so much to do, that's why. And meanwhile you doze off in the sun and the goats are waiting to be washed, fed their fill... "

"Why do you worry about all that? Go home and leave it to me."

Matchbox and Belly are in the shade of the neem, watching them intently. Tallfellow is stretched out under a palm.

"So, his highness will do everything? But how? In his

sleep? Come on, bring the goats. We'll bathe them in the well."

Shortie is nonplussed. What has got into Selvan? Why is he so angry and nasty? He gets up and looks around. The sheep are here and there, crooked into whatever shade they can find. The sun will go down in a while and they can be brought to the well then. A few minutes in the water, a few rubs down their backs and they will be clean and white, ready to swim out on their own. But why now?

"You said you were going to Tiruchengode to buy sugarcane. Have you gone and come back, Master?"

Selvan had boasted to him the day before that he was going to drive to town. He had learned to drive a bullock-cart some time ago. He wanted to go to town to fetch sugar cane, festive paint to decorate the horns of cows and buffaloes and offerings for the god.

"Mmm... my father went instead. Wouldn't let me drive. Some rubbish that I had no business hitching bullocks to a cart and driving off on cattle festival day! "

Now it is all clear. Selvan is piqued that he could not go to town and is here trying to bully him. If he had managed to go, his father would have given him spending money, to eat a snack, buy things. And on his way home, he would have driven the cart merrily along the shaded road.

Somewhere Shortie is pleased, happy that Selvan could not go to town. He smiles a quiet inward smile.

"Too bad! I was hoping you'd have gone... would have made me happy... but now that's gone too..."

Shortie is cryptic but an odd, wicked smile hovers around his mouth. Selvan barks out.

"Made you happy... what do you mean?"

"Can't you see? If you'd gone, you'd have got some money from your father, a few rupees. And then you'd have surely

given me some of that to help me pay for the stolen goat kid..."

The sarcasm in Shortie's tone is unmistakable. Selvan is even more irritated. He grits his teeth so hard that his eyes fill with involuntary tears. He realises how helpless he is and swallows a lump of disappointment. Shortie immediately feels sorry for him.

"Come on, Master! I was only joking..."

He touches his hand and leads him to the well. He stands by the well and calls to the goats. A few answer him from where they are, from under various trees. He calls to them again. This time he keeps up his goat-whistle for a while. Yet they are reluctant to leave the coolness under the trees. A kid that he always cuddles and carries around comes bounding up to him. He puts out both his hands, as if he were going to feed it. The kid raises it head and moves closer. A lovely male kid, frisky, roguish. It sniffs at his fingers and he clamps his hands on its neck. Selvan holds it by its hind legs. Matchbox comes running. She waits to see what they will do.

They carry the kid to the well and throw it into the water. It bleats piteously and falls straight down. The quiet dark water scatters into a whirl of ripples and slaps noisily against the walls of the well. Shortie peers into the well. The kid is swimming now and its little head is visible above the water. It is not sure where it is, where the steps are and where the rocks. It lets out a mournful bleat now and then.

Shortie jumps in, with Selvan close behind him. Matchbox is now by the well and peeps in shyly. Belly comes running behind her and pushes her into the well. Matchbox's legs go flying in the air and she lands in the middle of the water. The well is a medley of noises—splashing water, people screaming, the goat's bleats. It is as if the tired old walls and steps are screaming for them to stop, so furious is the sound that comes from the water.

The kid is now properly afraid. It tries to press itself against the walls and climb up. Shortie swims to where it is. He wants to drag it to the steps. But it is not easy to hold the kid and swim. It moves very fast and kicks its legs this way and that. He decides to pick it up by the neck and swim with his one arm stuck out. He finally hauls the kid to the steps. He finds a perch and sets the kid down, but does not let go. He bends down and, holding the kid close to him, washes its back thoroughly and then the rest of its body. He takes it into the water and pushes its head down again. When it comes up, he rubs it vigorously on the head and brings it back to the steps. He cajoles it to move up. It stands there shivering, wet and miserable. Then it scampers up, leaping across and over the crumbling steps and into the open fields. As its feet skid over the steps, they kick up a cloud of dust and rubble which tumble back into the well.

Shortie looks around him. There is Matchbox, beating her legs furiously in the water and swimming from one corner of the well to the next. Each time she does that, the water around her disperses into countless drops. She is new to it, has been learning only recently. Selvan and Belly are in opposite corners. Shortie goes up and drags another goat to the well. He throws it down. Tallfellow is up too. Seeing Shortie getting ready to wash his goats, he decides to bring his herd to the well.

Each of them has a goat to throw into the well. As they cast in goat after goat, the water is disturbed. The well is soon a hollow of goat and human heads. Belly has a difficult time with her white he-goat, the rascally one. When she tries to drag him in, he almost butts her. But she steps back and firmly goads him to jump into the well. Matchbox is still in the water, swimming in a corner. She knows that once they had washed their goats, they will help her wash hers.

Once washed, the goats looks bright and shiny. Their

hair sticks to their bodies, making them look gaunt. Some of them look new, they are almost a different colour. It will be a while before his goats are all done, thinks Shortie. There are twenty of them and, besides, Selvan is not helping. He is excited and frenzied. Each time a goat is thrown in, he waits till it gets its head up, then immediately pounces on it and presses its head back into the water. He holds the goat down for a few seconds, and sometimes pulls it further into the water. When the goat finally comes up, its eyes look reproachful. Every goat that is pulled into the water carries the fear of death with it.

This is also because the goats do not know that they are only being washed. In any case they don't enjoy the water. Once out of it, they run wildly, trying to shake the water off their bodies. Some rub themselves against the trunk of a palm, others roll in the mud.

They are watchful, Shortie, Tallfellow and Belly. They make sure that when they drop a goat down into the well, it does not land on another.

A goat flies straight in and lands near Selvan. He screams and falls on it, pulling it down. The goat is terrified. Just then Poochi comes by and looks into the well. Tallfellow who is up in the fields runs after the dog and pushes it in. It yelps and startles Selvan when it drops into the water. He screams and Matchbox, who is very scared now, also screams. Poochi paddles in the water and comes up to the side of a wall. Its feet find a stone perch. Selvan tries calling the dog to him, but Poochi ignores him, jumping into the water instead and trying to climb a wall. The dog's feet slip and it finds himself in the water again. Shortie swims to the steps and calls to the dog.

"Pooch! Here, Poochi, come here."

The dog swims towards him and he helps it up. Poochi half-slips, half-climbs up the steps, and once out, streaks

through the fields. It will be a while before Poochi ventures near the well again.

Now almost all the goats are in, except the pregnant ones. Selvan is still at his mad game, pressing a goat's head down, just when it has begun to swim. Sometimes he keeps it down for a long time and just when the goat struggles up and gasps for breath, he presses it back into the water. The goat thrashes about and comes up with a doleful moan.

"Don't do that Master! Poor thing! You might even kill it. And that's not good for a goat to die like that on the day of its festival."

Shortie's words have no effect on Selvan. He makes a face at him. Tallfellow throws in another goat and Selvan immediately pulls it down. An angry Tally turns on him. His memory still haunted by the three dead goats, he certainly does not want his goats dying all over again.

"Why the fuck do you do that? What if the goat dies? Fuck-all you can do then. I'll have to own up to it, not you!"

"Oh, Tally! Come on…"

Selvan tries to humour Tally. He swims over to him and tries to pull him into the water. Shortie cannot understand what has got into Selvan. Has the water addled his brain? Has something of its wild splashing coursed into his blood? The well is in shadow now, all along its edges and walls. In the centre is a circle of sunlight.

Shortie is suddenly afraid.

There are still a few goats left, a handful of them. Should he throw them in? He wants to throw one on Selvan's head. But poor thing! What if its legs break? Why the hell did Selvan come to them in the daytime? He is mad, thinks Shortie, I must make sure that I don't do or say anything that makes him madder.

Shortie throws in a goat. Tallfellow is already inside,

cleaning up one of his. Selvan remains by himself in a corner. Shortie jumps in. At once Selvan swims over and thumps him down into the water. Shortie slides deep down and swims under the water and surfaces after a while. He sees his goat edging towards the steps.

"Go on, Master!"

Shortie grimaces at Selvan and goes after the goat. He stops it from getting away and starts to rub it up and down. Once he is done, he helps it over the steps. Another goat falls in. Tallfellow's. Shortie stands away to let the goat swim freely.

With a scream, Selvan comes up from behind him and pulls him down. It is so sudden that Shortie loses his sense of where he is. He plunges deep down and when he comes up again, he is short of breath. Selvan again comes at him. Shortie has not yet regained his breath. Selvan is almost on him, ready to push him down into the water again.

Belly swims up swiftly and throws herself between Shortie and Selvan. Selvan does not appear to care. He kicks her down with all his strength.

"Master, have you gone mad?"

"Mad? Me? I'm completely fucked up, can't you see?"

"No! Stop that! Stop dragging people down into the water!"

Shortie looks Selvan in the eye and rebukes him sharply.

"Dai! It's my well. I'll do what I fucking want..."

"If it's your bloody well, keep it and rot with it!"

He did not want to say it, but the words come out, nevertheless, bearing all the pain that he has held locked in his heart.

"You chakkili dog! What did you say?"

Selvan rebounds on Shortie. He takes hold of his head

and presses it into the water, keeping it down as long as he can. Shortie does not resist, holds his breath and then slowly comes up, as if he knows that he ought not to have spoken and has accepted Selvan's punishment.

But Selvan is still angry. He swims after Shortie who now rests by the edge of a wall, trying to regain his breath. Selvan holds him by his hair and hits him hard on his jaw. He jumps and kicks his legs at Shortie's chest. Shortie pushes him away and with great difficulty staggers to the steps. He gestures to Belly.

"Let's go."

Selvan is still in the water. He calls out:

"Right, go! Go and fuck Belly!"

Something breaks inside Shortie. His anger, pushed deep into his chest, pushes through his ribs and enters his blood. He grits his teeth and lunges down after Selvan. He holds him by the head and with all his strength brings his legs to bear down on his shoulders. Holding him thus, he pushes him down into the water.

Deep down, all the way down.

Selvan drifts under, his legs dangling.

Rascal! That'll teach him. Shortie turns to Belly.

"Come on!"

He has barely stepped onto the first step when he hears Tallfellow yell.

"Dai, where the hell is Selvan?"

Shocked, he turns back and just then Matchbox screams and comes at him from the opposite end of the well. She huddles into a corner and watches.

The point where Selvan went down is still. No movement except for the occasional ripple. Shortie wonders if Selvan is keeping still on purpose, pretending to be hurt. Can't put it

past him. He looks around. No sign of his head. Selvan's head that had bobbed in the water all afternoon.

Matchbox screams again and runs up the steps. Tallfellow jumps in and starts searching. Was Selvan somewhere in the water, enjoying their anxiety, their fear? Shortie's legs and arms feel like water. His mouth opens and then shuts, but no sound issues from him.

"Dai, Shortie! Run! Just run away!"

Tallfellow, who has come up after searching for Selvan, hisses at him.

Shortie's mouth stays open. His body has not stopped shivering.

Tallfellow hisses at him again, this time angrily.

"Run, I say!"

He shakes him by his shoulders.

Belly calls out tearfully.

"Go away Shortie, run away!"

A huge sob escapes Shortie's chest.

"Master! Selvan!"

He dives into the well. He does not resist the water. He goes down. Quietly. His eyes search the well. He is in white water now, white from the soft earth. And then a few moments later, all is dark. The water is black and cool.

Now he can see things very clearly. The walls are there, as always, and they seem to invite him. He cannot stop. No, he must go deeper. Further. Further than anyone has ever gone. To the end, where there is only thick darkness. Where he cannot see anymore, where he cannot know how deep it is.

His legs are free of mud. Of soft earth. They pierce through the water. Taking him down to the deep that knows no end.

'He stood naked under a raining sky… elated, as the rain coursed through his naked body. It whipped down on him, pounding his shoulders, massaging them. He bent down and took the pouring rain on his back. He straightened and raised his face to the sky. Then threw his head back, and let the water flow down his parched throat till the thirst he had felt all day dissolved. The rain washed out the layered dirt of his body, streamed and rinsed his hair. He felt light and cleansed.'

This English translation of a contemporary Tamil classic captures a world that is virtually unknown outside the Tamil village – the layered and complex inner world of dalit 'untouchables', who struggle to hold their own in a context of brutal injustice.

Set in the late 1960s, *Seasons of the Palm* tells the story of Shortie and his friends – Tallfellow, Stumpleg, Belly and Matchbox – 'untouchable' chakkili children who herd goats for the gounder caste landlords.

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